APRIL 35¢

ALFRED

# HITCHCOCK'S

## MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NEW stories
presented by
the master of SUSPENSE

Dear Readers,

The lion on the cover is genuine lion —*Felis leo*—and on loan for our tableau from Metro Goldwyn Mayer. Needless to say, he does not have a chance when confronted by a down-the-nose stare from the Master of Suspense and King of All Beasts, *Rotundo Alfred*. To which I can only add:*Ars Gratia Artis* or "Lion, anyone?"

Now then, I would like to thank all those who have so painstakingly put off writing to me about the stories which have been appearing in this fine publication. And I also want to extend some expression of appreciation to those who have actually written. To the very few whose missives were adversely critical, I am most thankful, for they alone relieved a monotony of endless, sincere, discerning praise.

I am pleased to present to you this month, fourteen stories—a neurotic baker's dozen. It is a fairly serious issue, concerning itself primarily with death and money and the acquisition of one or the other. There is a mother-in-law tale, however. And also a slight epic of a well-meaning psychotic. So there is a bit of lightness and joy.

Alfred Hitchcock

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# ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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by Richard Levinson
and William Link

*Did you ever see a television set walking? Well I did! This particular set was after me—others, no doubt, are commanding your attention—and I was in full retreat. Fortunately, when the cowboy on its picture tube took a slow, careful shot at me, I awoke.*

# SHOOTING SCRIPT

THE microphone, held at the end of the long, pole-like boom, was poised overhead. It followed, prying, as the man walked up the path and rang the bell. Camera one moved in behind his back for an over-the-shoulder shot. When the woman opened the door, the camera held long enough for an establishing close-up of her face. Blonde, smoke-like hair, disciplined back into an austere bun. A smile of recognition. Blue, knowing eyes.

"Come in," she said. "He's at work."

The man entered, closing the door behind him. There was a slow dissolve from camera one to camera two inside. Boom two picked them up as they talked their way down the foyer and into the living room. When they sat on the couch and kissed each other, the camera dollied in close.

"When will he be back?" asked the man.

"Late. We have plenty of time."

Their voices hit the tilted microphone, ran through a complex of wires, and emerged in the control room. The audio man, fingers on his dials, boosted them, calmed them, toned them into perfect electronic signals for broadcasting.

Camera one's talley light flashed on outside the house. It showed another man coming up the walk. This man's face was grim, his stride quick. He jammed a key into the front door and threw it open, stalked down the foyer.

Camera two showed the two breaking their kiss at the sudden pound of footsteps. The woman, startled, tried to get up, but she was precariously balanced and fell softly back onto the couch.

Camera three, inactive until now, showed the living room doorway. The man who'd entered the house came through the threshold and stopped.

"Al—" the woman said. "Listen, I—"

Al reached into his pocket and took out a gun.

"Hey, look—!" said the man on the couch. His face was in shadow.

Al fired at the two of them, emptying the gun. The mike boom raised a fraction so the sound of the shots wouldn't harm its delicate membranes.

Al watched, as did camera three, while the woman and the man slumped forward from the couch. He dropped the gun on the floor and brought his hand up to his face.

"My God," he said. "Oh, my God."

Then, while he stood there, the lights of all three cameras blinked on. The machines rolled forward on their rubber wheels, straight toward him, pulling their trail of cables behind them. He saw that no one was running them, that they were motivating themselves. Ponderously, they pushed forward. The long, eight-inch lenses aimed at him like snouts. He glanced over his shoulder, suddenly frantic, and started to back away, but the mike boom dipped down and stopped him. Then all the lights — bright, burning kleigs and small baby spots, twisted on their racks and beat their brilliance on him. The cameras rolled, the mike boom swerved and prodded, the lights glared. He fell down, screaming. The collision was merciful because it brought a warm darkness.

It was, of course, the same dream Al Standish had been having all week. The repetition, however, did not accustom him to it. Today he burst from his sleep like a swimmer from the water, just as he had the previous mornings. And when he shaved his hand was uncontrollable. The razor cut through the lather smoothly; then his hand twitched and a small cut, bleeding, appeared on the side of his face. He frowned and patched the cut.

When he came down for breakfast, Carol could tell he'd had the dream. "Again?" she said.

"Yeah. That's the fifth straight night. Damn thing doesn't change a bit."

"Dear, why don't you tell me what it's about?" She ran lazy fingers through her blonde hair, tightening the plastic clasp that held the bun in place.

Standish sucked at his coffee. "It's not important. And it isn't the dream that bothers me; it's the way I dream it. Like a blasted television show."

"You need a vacation," Carol said. "It's as simple as that."

"I know. But try telling that to Merrick." He shook his head. "You know, I've heard about things like this happening to television directors. When they dream they see cameras and close-ups — just as if they're directing the dream from a control room. It's like being in a hall of mirrors."

"It's strange, though, that it should be the same one every night. I mean, I can understand your dreaming from a television point of view. After all, you're a television director. But if the, well, if the *story* of the dream is always the same, there doesn't seem to be any explanation for that, does there?"

"No, I guess not." He got up.

"Am I in it?" she asked.

"What?"

"Your dream. Am I in it?"

"No," he said, uncomfortable. "No one's in it that I know."

"Well, it'll go away. Take a pill tonight."

She walked him through the living room and down the foyer to the door. There, mechanically, she kissed him.

The KCAB-TV studios were five miles from his house, a ten minute drive if the lights were with him. They rose in freshly-washed glass and new white stone from behind a protective border of hedging. Above the revolving entrance door, were plastic replicas of the station's call letters, each one three feet high and colored by embedded lights. An American flag flared at the end of a flagpole on the front lawn.

Standish wheeled his car into the back parking area and got out. He walked quickly to the heavy, soundproofed doors of Studio Three and went in, conscious that he was late.

The crew was already setting up in the areas reserved for "The Red Holliday Show." Babitz was up on the catwalk, pounding at the lights and aiming them. Lederer was tapping the microphones. Rowe, the crew chief, had started the cameras warming up. They all glanced at Standish when he opened the back doors to enter, letting unaccustomed sunlight flood the concrete studio floor.

"Morning," said Standish. "Sorry I'm late."

Red Holliday stood in a corner applying makeup. His boyish face, reflected from a small mirror, frowned at Standish. "The show goes on the same time, Al. When you're late we have to cut down on rehearsals."

Standish didn't like Red Holliday. Merrick had given him the show to direct as a last resort, when two other directors had walked off it in disgust. "You can handle him, Al," Merrick had said. "Sure, he's tough to get along with, but he pulls them in. See what you can do, huh? It's the best morning show we've got. And the most sponsors."

During the first few weeks Standish had made an all out effort to become friendly with Holliday. He had discussed technical problems with him. He had conceded minor and frequently major points. He had even taken him home for dinner several times. Holliday was not married. He would smile at Standish's wife. "Carol," he would say, "you have no idea how much a good home cooked dinner means to me. Your husband's a lucky man." Then he would smile the patented Red Holliday smile.

It had worked well for a few months. Then, as the other directors had predicted, their relationship ground to a halt. Once given the chance, Holliday had been too demanding. He took to directing from the floor, waving the cameras in closer or criticizing the lighting effects Standish had worked out with Babitz.

This morning, while applying makeup, he called up to the cat-

walk. "Hey, Earl, why don't you kill that light this morning? It washed me out yesterday. Use a smaller one."

Standish went over him. "Red, there was a reason for that. You don't show up under a smaller one. Check it on the monitor."

Holliday bowed. "I hear and obey. Although sometimes, Al, I don't see how you can cover all the details, coming in late like this."

"Ten minutes, Red. I was ten minutes late."

"Easy," said Holliday, smiling. "Just kidding around."

Babitz called from the catwalk. "You want this thing on or off, Al?"

"Leave it on," said Standish. "We'll check it after the show if there's any washout."

Holliday, grinning, went off to have cue cards made, while Standish conferred with the floor men. There were not many problems to iron out. For Standish "The Red Holliday Show," with the exception of its star, was an easy production. It was frankly geared for the housewives of the city and slotted for a time between their breakfast and their ironing. The fact that it was across the boards, running a half hour every morning, five days a week, built up what Merrick liked to call "habit viewing." The show featured a young girl singer, a young male harmonica player, and between them, around them, talking into their acts and joking with them, was Red Holliday. Standish did not particularly like the show. He preferred the news shows he directed later in the day. These required mere tetchnical facility on his part; there was never any temperament involved.

Standish mounted to the control room. "Okay, people," he said over the loudspeaker system, "stand by for rehearsal."

For the next half hour, he worked over the simple mechanics of camera motion. The control room, a long booth with a glass face showing the studio floor, was isolated, and in its seclusion he felt removed from the demands and problems of the people below. Directly above the glass in front of him was a line of monitors that presented the picture each camera was taking. He had only to punch a button to select the one he wanted for broadcasting.

With a corner of his mind he made the proper picture choice; his finger pressed the proper button. The major part of his thoughts, however, rambled. The big cameras below, trucking and breaking, reminded him of his dream. He felt, somehow, like a man in an aquarium, watching a form of life with which he had no connection. The cameras rolled, the lights pulsed, and he saw himself in his living room again. The flicker of the spread monitors lulled him; he watched them through half-closed eyes.

Once more he saw himself walking down his foyer. Once more an imaginary camera focused on two lovers embracing on the couch. His wife was lovely. She kissed the stranger with an open-mouthed eagerness that she had not given to him in years. Standish strained from his director-participant position in the fantasy to see the face of her companion. He willed the camera closer. But the man's face was in shadow, just as it always was. Then his vision of himself came into the living room and reached for the gun in its pocket...

"Five minutes!"

The voice of the stage manager on the floor broke through the control room's loud speakers. Standish, alerted by the sound, rubbed his eyes and glanced at the large wall clock. The red hand swept in its orbit, changing in each revolution to keep an exact degree of time. Babitz came into the control room and sat at his lighting panel. Lederer moved into the audio niche. Rowe, after last minute checking on the floor, came up and eased himself into his chair beside Standish.

"All right, boys," said Standish, just as he did every morning, "let's make magic."

They regarded him vacantly and turned to their controls.

Standish, with one eye on the clock, tilted his headset microphone toward his mouth. "Stand by," he said. The bustle below him subsided as people moved into their opening positions. Red Holliday sat down behind his desk and faced camera one. He moistened his lips and smiled. The female vocalist waited in her set, standing before a gauze scrim that billowed in the wind from two fans. The harmonica player sat on a stool near the mike boom, dully looking at his instrument.

The second hand touched twelve.

"Here we go," said Standish. "Spin the theme. Coming out of slide. Steady one. Cue Holliday. One!" He activated camera one, and Holliday's smile lit the row of monitors in front of him.

"Good morning, Mom," said Red Holliday. "Here's another Red Holliday gabfest for you. So why don't you just sit down and finish that cup of coffee and give a listen? Huh? How about it?"

The show went as it always did, without crisis or mishap. Long ago, Standish had found that he could direct without becoming involved, much as the driver of a car could shift gears and turn corners while engaged in conversation. His fingers darted over the control board while he thought about the problems that had crept up over the past few months. His job, and he couldn't deny it any longer, bored him. He needed a rest, a journey to blue lakes and warm suns. And there was that most troublesome of feelings, the vague impression that

Carol was drawing away from him. That, of course, was the root of the dream. But why, he wondered, carefully dissolving from camera one to camera two, did the dream involve another man? Carol's recent aloofness did not imply infidelity. And would he be jealous enough in real life to use a gun if he discovered proof of unfaithfulness? Of course not. Besides, he didn't have a gun.

Then the thought came to him that the night watchman had a gun. It was kept in a flimsy locker in the basement, secured by a lock of doubtful strength.

Feeling foolish, Standish gave himself to his monitors. The clock wound away the segments of the show; Red Holliday was whimsical in triplicate; the girl sang and the boy played his harmonica, and eventually Standish said into his headset, "Give them thirty."

"Well, that about does it for this morning," said Holliday, one eye on the floor man's cue. "We'll all be seein' you tomorrow, and we got some real special things for you. Okay? Take care of yourself and have a good day."

"Spin it," said Standish, and the music sounded from the audio corner. "Going to black." He leaned over and yelled into the inter-com on his panel that led to the master control room, "It's all yours, Master." Then the on-air monitor in front of him lit up with the station's call letters. "This is KCAB," said a voice, "bringing you the best in news and entertainment."

Standish leaned back and took off the headset. He lit a cigarette. The three engineers, with a great deal of shuffling and snapping of switches, left the control room. Below, the floor cleared rapidly as the stagehands struck parts of the sets and the camera men headed for the station commissary and coffee.

Standish was always mildly surprised by the speed with which the studio emptied itself. First the show would be on the air — everyone vitally concerned with its smooth facilitation — then within seconds after it finished the lights would go out, the cables would be braided, and the large room would be stark and desolate. He sat now in the control room, watching the process. The air seemed warmer with the discharge of his energy and he felt sleepy. His next show was not for two hours, and the studio would be empty until the afternoon. He leaned back in his swivel chair, pushed the cigarette into an ashtray, and dozed off.

It was a surface sleep, not the real thing, and he was able to dream what he wished. There was Carol, as she had looked five years ago on a Maine honeymoon, bundled and flushed under bright Autumn trees. And there was Carol as she looked every morning now, oddly remote,

sidestepping carefully all moments of tenderness.

This last thought woke Standish completely and he frowned. He was perspiring, and his shirt stuck to his back. Below him, on the floor, someone stood in a shadowed corner talking on a telephone. Aside from that one dim person, the studio was empty. Standish noticed idly that the mike boom, left by the crew, hung over the telephoner's head. Just as idly, he glanced at the audio panel and its switches. Smiling under a sudden compulsion of mischief, he turned on the boom.

...able to get out of here in a few minutes. Soon as I take this makeup off."

The voice was Red Holliday's. Standish was about to turn off the switch, but he paused.

"Okay, fine. The last news show is at four. He probably won't be home until four-thirty. Uh-huh. Call him and tell him you'll be out most of the afternoon so he doesn't phone. That's right. I'll be over in twenty minutes . . . Sure, hon, of course." There was an amplified click as the phone was cradled.

Standish watched as Holliday crossed under the racks of dead lights and left the studio by a side door. Then he turned off the microphone. He sat thinking.

"Al?" The voice came from the inter-com box to Master Control. "Al, you up in studio three's control room?"

"Yes."

"You're being paged."

"Thank you."

Standish picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Who is this, please?" said the voice of the station operator.

"Al Standish."

"Oh. Just a minute, Mr. Standish, I have a call for you."

There was a pause, then Carol's voice. "Is that you, Al?"

"Yes."

"I tried to call you in your office, dear, but you weren't there."

"I'm in the control room."

"I watched the show," she said.

"Did you?"

"Yes. Very good. You had some nice shots of the singer. And Red was rather funny. Nice show."

"Thank you."

"The reason I called, I'll be out shopping all afternoon. I won't be back until a little before you get home. When are you through, by the way?"

"Four."

"All right, I'll see you then. Maybe we can go out for dinner. Bye."

"Good-bye."

Standish hung up and left the control room. He walked across the studio floor and out into the corridor. Two secretaries, hugging schedules, said good morning to him. Miss Jason, Merrick's secretary, said Merrick wanted to see him when he had time. And one of the studio guides, in answer to

his question, said that Red Holliday had just left.

Standish took the elevator to the basement and walked to the night watchman's locker. The lock held, but the side hinges gave, and it wasn't very difficult to open.

He parked the car and walked up the front path. Holliday's red convertible was parked down the block, half obscured by a neighbor's hedges. Standish opened the door quietly and moved down the short foyer, his feet careful on the soft carpet.

The high fidelity set was on in the living room and he heard the sound of glasses. When he entered the two of them stared at him. His wife tried to get to her feet, but slipped back on the couch.

"Al—!" she said.

Holliday set down his glass on the coffee table and stood up. "I guess this looks kind of funny, doesn't it?" he said, half smiling. "Believe me, Al, it's not what you think. I just came over to..." His voice ran down. He could not think of anything.

Standish took the gun out of his pocket.

"Hey, now look—" Holliday began.

Standish fired twice. Then he turned the gun on his wife. She was trying to get to her feet when he shot her.

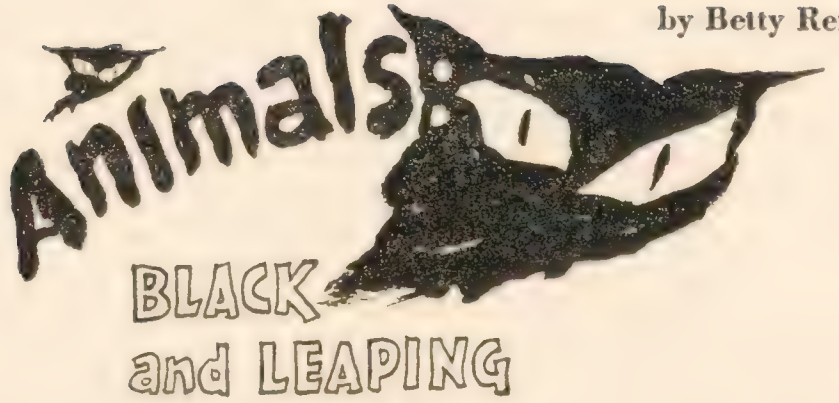
After a moment, after they had both fallen, Standish looked around to see if there was a mike boom above him, or carefully positioned cameras. He sat down in a chair and let the gun drop to the rug. Then he waited patiently for the darkness.

When he awoke he smiled because it occurred to him that the dream had changed. This time no cameras, no hall of mirrors viewpoint. This time just a straight and simple dream. Since some of its basic elements had changed, perhaps it would go away. He would go down to breakfast and tell Carol.

He looked around the room, puzzled. He must still be asleep. Holliday and his wife, lifeless, lay beside each other. The gun was on the rug. Standish felt a little bewildered; his thoughts were clouded. He tried to think, but the pounding on the front door disturbed him.

He decided he'd go and open it, and get rid of whoever it was. Then he could sit down and wait to wake up.

by Betty Ren Wright




THE DAY BEGAN like any other normal day – special, of course, because it was an anniversary, but not clouded with bad omens or portents of doom. Mrs. Conroy knew herself to be of a morbid turn of mind, still she honestly tried not to look for trouble, and in this bright morning she had found none.

"How would it be if we have a real anniversary party tonight?" she asked at the breakfast table. "Just a cozy little time for the three of us?" Her hands moved from egg cup to napkin ring as she spoke; these were talismans from the old life and she touched them as though they might bring her luck.

Tony set down his coffee cup and smiled at her. It was his careful smile, the one reserved for her alone, she thought. She both resented and welcomed it; at least, it indicated he had not reached the point where he cared nothing for his mother's feelings.

"Sounds fine, Ma. Only trouble is, Tina and I were sort of planning a night on the town. You know—first anniversary and all." He looked hopefully at the newspaper across the table, behind which Tina was hidden. *Leave me out of it,* the held-up newspaper implied. *We've made our plans; what's the use of discussing it?*

Mrs. Conroy clutched convulsively at her son's fingers as his hand closed over hers. There were moments, like this one, when the loneliness became too much—when

*The mother-in-law is so well thought of, that she has been made the butt of jokes reserved for her and her alone. This, I venture to say, may very well be changed after acquaintanceship with our Mrs. Conroy and her leaping, black beasts.*

the egg cup and the napkin ring, the walnut desk, the rug, all things that she had brought with her from the old house, no longer helped. They belonged to another woman, who had had a husband and a little boy and a funny old dog and a comfortable home of her own. Something very bad had happened to that woman; Joe, her husband, had died after a long, painful, and expensive illness; her dog had died; her house had been sold. Now Mrs. Conroy existed in that woman's place.

"We'll do it some other night, Ma. How about it? A real special dinner and then we'll all take in a show. How does that sound?"

She nodded. It was a time to be understanding; the doctor had told her often that things would improve only if she learned to control her feelings. In spite of herself, though, tears burned her eyes, and her coffee cup rattled violently against the saucer.

Tony ripped his hand from hers. "For Pete's *sake!*" he shouted. "Crying again!"

Mrs. Conroy cowered at the angry sounds that followed his outcry: the rataplan of footsteps in the hall, the slam of the front door. She had done it once more. With the best of intentions, she had given Tony's day a bad start and had destroyed her own. What if, in his anger, he strode out into the street without looking first? What if he drove too fast, or had an argument with his supervisor, or . . . ?

The newspaper went down and Tina gave her a long look. "Satisfied?" she asked softly.

In the privacy of her little bedroom, and surrounded by her own things, Mrs. Conroy waited for the day to pass. The doctor would not approve of this; he had given her the names of several agencies which needed volunteer help and had urged her to "get into things." Lying around thinking, he explained, was bad. But she could never make him understand the depths of her despair, the indescribable weariness which made his suggestions ridiculous. She was sick—she knew she was sick—and she knew she must get better for Joe's sake. But the only way to get better was to understand the things that raged inside of her.

Like animals these things were, tearing and snarling, then creeping back into the darkness where they slept and fattened and prepared themselves for the next venturing forth. They were beyond her—these animal angers, hates, and fears which the doctor said she must learn to manage. Perhaps, if she thought long enough and hard enough, she could find a way to escape them. Here, in this room that was at least partly her own, she might find the answer.

Downstairs, the telephone rang.

The vacuum cleaner was silenced, and Mrs. Conroy pictured Tina already in the big arm chair near the phone, her slim legs swiveled under her, limber as a child. She lay very still, hardly breathing, knowing that she ought not to listen.

Tina's voice was a murmur. Guiltily, Mrs. Conroy got up and tiptoed over to the door. She opened it a crack, then went to the dresser and began rearranging things because she could not bear just to stand near the door listening.

It wasn't a hard conversation to follow, even when hearing only half of it. There had been others similar to this one.

". . . Mmm . . . Of course she's all right . . . In her room . . . I don't know, we haven't discussed it, Tony . . ."

Now would begin the slightly rising inflection, the anticipatory anger, as Tina waited to see exactly how things would go. Mrs. Conroy understood every tone in her daughter-in-law's voice and the patterns they followed. Her fingers touched her husband's picture, the Wedgwood pin dish, the mirror backed with mother-of-pearl. She knew what was coming now.

". . . Yes, I *really* want to go out—we've been planning it for a month!" Pause. Then the sigh that was also an expletive. "Oh, don't bother; don't say any more! I know what you're getting at, and I know what we'll do . . . I knew it the minute she mentioned her cozy little party . . . My, God, I wish you'd grow up!"

Now the long silence and the—yes, there it was—the sniffle. Tony's father had always been defeated by tears, and Mrs. Conroy couldn't help but wonder whether Tony might not be taken in in the same way. (She wondered sometimes if Tina had cried to make him propose.) She waited, her hand on the Wedgwood dish. *Let him be strong,* she prayed. *It's not the anniversary party; that doesn't matter one way or the other, Lord—just don't let him go under.*

"Oh, all right then . . . Yes . . . No, honey, it's all right. It's just that I get so sick . . . Yes . . . (whispered) yes."

It was over.

*Thank you, Lord,* Mrs. Conroy prayed. *Thank you, thank you.* She made her way back to the bed and sat down on the edge of it, her hands pressed tightly between her knees. She had won, she thought; her son loved her and would always love her. With every new test her heart quailed and she was shaken by doubt, and then, as if by a miracle, he was restored to her. I don't deserve him, she thought. I just don't deserve him.

She began to picture what the evening would be like. All three of them dressed up, of course, because it was a party. There would be soup first—a recipe her mother had written on a card and tucked into Mrs. Conroy's own hope box

—then lobster and asparagus and a good, tangy salad. Mrs. Conroy saw herself serving, taking care of the young people, fussing over them a little because it was such a special night in their lives. They would be glad they had stayed home, even Tina, who could never bear to admit she had been wrong. It would be an evening they would always remember.

There was a knock at the door and it swung open. Tina came in, her cheeks pink, her eyes blue.

"We're going to talk, Mother Conroy," she said. "We must."

Mrs. Conroy gestured timidly toward the rocker at the window. "Sit down," she said. "I was thinking."

Tina didn't move. "I'll bet you've been thinking," she said cruelly. "And I'll bet I know what you've been thinking about. You heard Tony call—you listened and don't pretend you didn't—and you know he wants to stay home tonight because you suggested it. Well, I've been thinking too. This is the end of our first year together and I just realized that we're still not married—not really. And if the first year is like this, what are all the others going to be?"

Mrs. Conroy began to shiver. There was no place to run to, no way to escape the terrible battering of Tina's words. Understand, the doctor had said, understand and you will be all right. Understand.

"What do you want?" Mrs. Conroy asked. "I don't know what you want me to do?"

Tina hesitated. For a minute Mrs. Conroy thought that what she feared was not going to happen, and so her heart stopped its pounding. But she had relaxed too soon.

"I want you to move out," Tina said slowly. "I'm sorry—it's an awful thing to say—but I want you to live someplace else and leave us alone. And Tony wants it too."

It was all forgivable except the last. Tina was over-wrought, sulky because her plans had been changed, spoiled because she was young and pretty. Mrs. Conroy accepted all this. But when the girl came right out and said that she also spoke for Tony, it was too much. She did not *want* to live with them any more; she did not want to *live*. It was what she had told the doctor the first time she had gone to see him—she did not want to *live*—and what she had been repeating silently, through all his cajoling and kindly suggestions. Eventually, she had been certain, Tina would try to force her out.

*I might have left quietly if she hadn't said that about Tony,* Mrs. Conroy thought as she stirred a teaspoon of grated onion into the soup. *I suppose I could have taken a room somewhere. But now it'll be different. The rest of her life, when she thinks of me, she'll be reminded of what a terrible thing she forced*

*me to do. And Tony*— Mrs. Conroy could almost smile—not because of Tony's hurt, but because he would know whose fault it was that he no longer had his mother.

She touched the little box of pills in her apron pocket. Tasteless little things that she had used to put the dog to sleep when he had sickened. *How amazing the little things were!* she thought, and for a minute the kitchen spun wildly and the room became dark. *How astonishing that one little white pill had the power to silence all the raging animals of her mind.*

The soup was ready. She could hear Tony and Tina in the living room, the radio playing softly, the voices keeping up a pretense of pleasure. It was only a pretense, of course; Tony had been told by now what had happened that afternoon. He wouldn't say anything; he would try to reason with Tina later in the evening. And tomorrow — but tomorrow would be much, much too late. *It's strange,* Mrs. Conroy thought, *but I'm glad. I guess I'm just too tired to fight.*

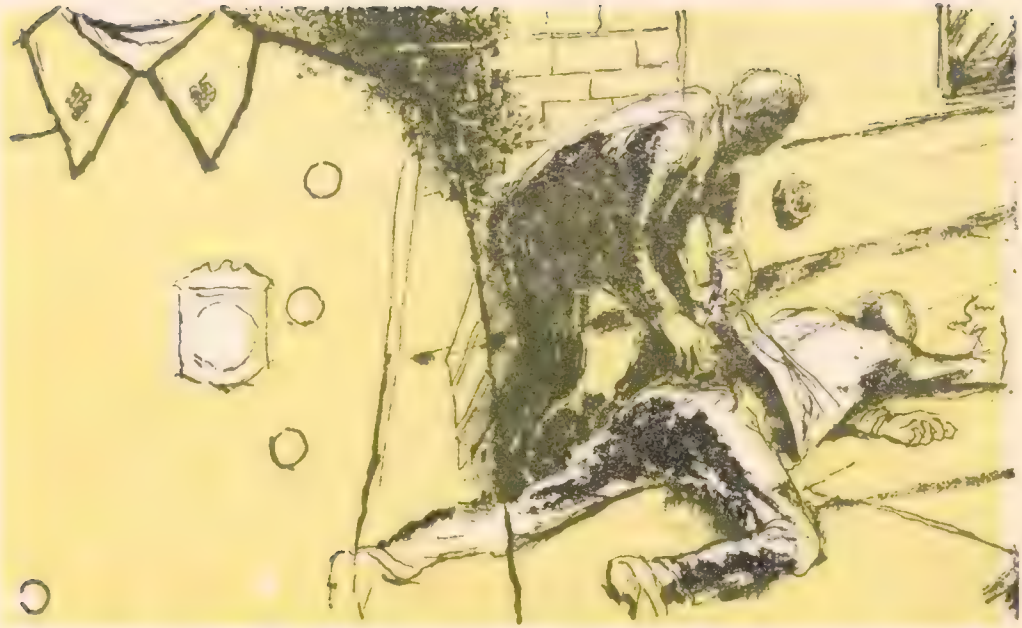
She patted her hair and went to the door to call them. Tony was talking, his voice just audible above the music of the dance band.

". . . Not like that," he was saying. "I wish you'd have let me do it. I don't want her here either . . . I know things have been rotten for you. But we could have found a better way to tell her, for Pete's sake."

With her hand on the door, ready to push it open, Mrs. Conroy waited for the screaming within her to stop. They were all loose now, the great, black, leaping animals moving in from every side, their eyes cold and human and pitiless. She could not bear it. *I hate him,* she thought, *oh, God, now I hate them both!*

The screaming ended; the animals had loped and slunk away. Mr. Conroy turned and walked back to the stove, moving with care, for any sudden, startling movement might spoil her intentions. Slowly she poured the soup into the lovely old tureen that had been her mother's. Then she took the little box from her apron pocket, opened it, and dropped the pills one at a time, all six of them, into the bowl. They disappeared into the golden, steaming depths.

Mrs. Conroy picked up the tureen, a hand on each side of it, and walked into the dining room. "Come, children," she called, and her voice was calm. "Party time."



# FRAME-UP

by Jack Ritchie

THERE was a note on my desk when I reported for duty at four in the afternoon. I took a couple of aspirins and went to Captain Willard's office.

He waited until I closed the door. "Sit down, Morgan."

Willard folded his hands then and studied me. "Don't you answer a phone? We've been trying to get you since three this morning."

I blinked at the sharp sunlight from the window behind him. "I sleep pretty heavy."

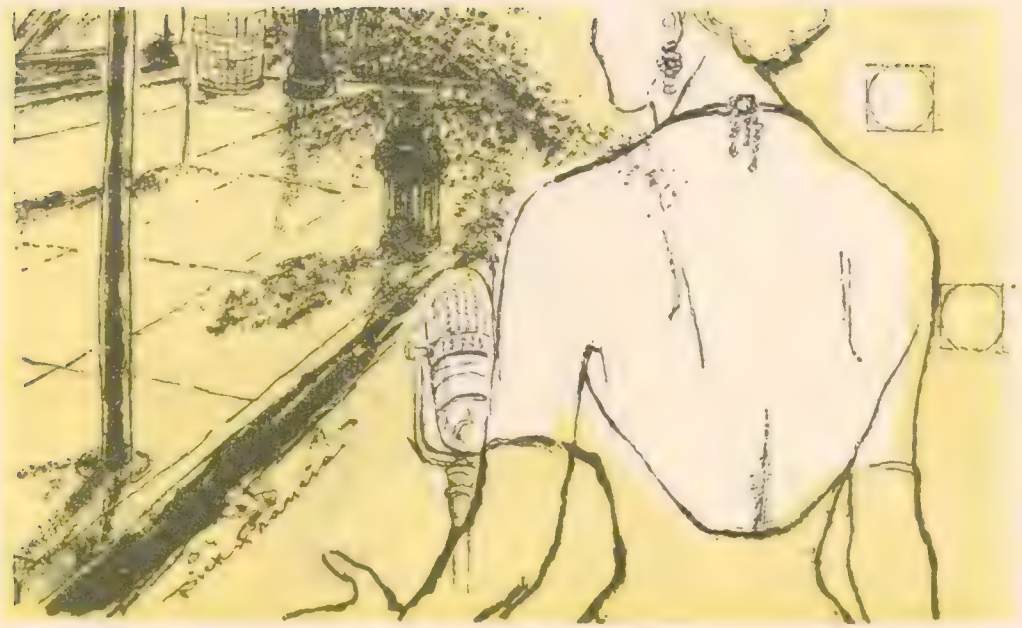
"How about knocks on your door? Do they make any impression? Peterson and James have been trying them since noon."

I shrugged slightly. "I went out after I woke up. They must have missed me." I watched his face. "Something important?"

Willard grunted and then leafed through a few of the top pages in the manila folder on his desk. "You got a pretty good record, Morgan. The promotions came fast."

I smiled faintly. "But that isn't why you called me in."

His hand went to a complaint sheet on the corner of his desk. "Do you know anybody named



Crawford? Willie Crawford?"

I thought about it. "No."

His gray eyes were on my face. "Maybe I can help you. He's a bartender at the Sicily Club."

I shook my head. "I wouldn't know any of the bartenders there."

Willard looked at the sheet again. "Crawford claims that you slugged him on a dark street as he was coming home from work at three this morning. He also claims that you took eight hundred dollars from his wallet."

I got halfway out of my chair. "He's a damn liar."

Willard waved me back down. "I hope so. For your sake and the department's." He flipped the switch of his inter-com. "If Crawford's come back, bring him in here."

Crawford was a short, slight man in his late forties and the cheekbone beneath his left eye was purple and swollen.

Willard watched me. "Do you know him now, Morgan?"

*Remorse is most inconvenient. And bicarbonate on the rocks will in no way assuage it. There is only one conclusion that can be drawn: If killing someone is going to bother you, perhaps you were meant for better things.*

"I've seen him."

Crawford did his talking to the captain. "Like I told you, I quit work and was walking down this street to where my car was parked, when Morgan steps out in front of me. He's drunk and mean."

Willard stopped him. "You saw him and you knew his name was Morgan?"

Crawford's eyes gleamed. "Sure. I seen him when he raided the club and shot Rick Sparrow."

Willard looked at me for a few seconds and then turned back to Crawford. "You said the street was dark. How did you know it was Morgan?"

"It wasn't that dark," Crawford said. "There was a few lights.' '

Willard seemed to sigh. "Go on."

"Morgan was drunk and mean. He stopped me. And the next thing I knew, he slugged me and I'm down on the ground. That's when he rifled my pockets."

Willard raised an eyebrow. "You just lay there and let him do that?"

Crawford flushed slightly. "I'm a little man, Captain, and I like to live. I don't put my life on the line to protect eight hundred dollars. I made like I was dead and hoped he would go away."

Willard looked at me. "Naturally you got a different story?"

I took a drag of my cigarette. "He's got the place right, but that's all. I saw him early this morning, but he was the one who was drunk. He started making trouble for me."

"Did he have a reason to?"

"None I can figure. But a drunk doesn't need one."

Crawford's voice went high. "I was stone cold sober, Captain. I haven't had a drink in ten years. Ask the boss, Lucca. Ask anybody who works at the club."

"He smelled and acted drunk."

Willard rubbed his chin. "Why didn't you arrest him?"

I hesitated. "I figured he had troubles enough after I hit him."

Willard folded his hands. "Go on with your story."

"There isn't any more story," I snapped irritably. "When Crawford went down, I just made sure that he wasn't hurt bad and then I walked away. Somebody probably rolled him after I left."

Crawford leaned over the captain's desk. "I was never unconscious a second. Morgan went through my wallet and took the money."

Willard picked up the complaint sheet again and checked it. "That's enough for now, Crawford. We'll call you when we need you."

When Crawford was gone, Willard looked up. "You sure you got nothing to add?"

"No. It's my word against his."

"That's not good enough, Morgan. You know that."

I puffed at my cigarette. "It's a frame-up, Captain."

He raised an eyebrow. "Why would he want to frame you?"

"I don't know."

"Would it have anything to do with the fact that you led the raid on the Sicily Club two weeks ago?"

"I don't see why that should bother him. He doesn't own the place. He's just a bartender."

Willard regarded me. "Tell me again why you didn't arrest him this morning."

I rubbed out my cigarette. "All right. I had a few drinks myself at the time. It would have meant a thirty-day suspension at least if I was found that way. That's why I couldn't bring him in."

Willard waited awhile before he spoke again. "You've been doing a lot of drinking lately, Morgan. I hear that and I can see it, too."

"Not on duty, Captain," I said.

He turned his swivel chair and looked out of the window. "Can't you forget Rick Sparrow?"

I said nothing.

"I know it'll take time, Morgan, but the bottle isn't going to help." He turned back to me. "There was nothing you could do. It was self-defense and you got a squad of police to back up your story."

He closed the manila folder. "Until we get this cleared up, you're under suspension."

I unpinned the badge from my wallet and shoved it across the desk. "Do you believe him or me?"

Willard didn't look at me. "I can't afford to believe anything. I'll have to find out for sure."

My partner, Pete Halleck, was waiting at our desks in the big room. He glanced at his watch and put on his hat. "We'd better shove off and start earning our pay."

I sat down. "You'll be going without me."

His blue water eyes got a little wider than usual. "What goes on?"

Pete's round face was thoughful when I finished telling him. "Why would this Crawford," he asked, "make up a story like that?"

"You tell me."

Pete shook his head. "The name Crawford doesn't ring a bell. I never heard of him before." He smiled sadly. "What I would of done, Fred, was to turn in Crawford last night. Even if you got a suspension, it would have been better than this."

"The advice comes late."

"Honesty is the best policy," Pete said solemnly. He hesitated a moment. "There's one thing, though, Fred." Then he shook his head. "I guess I'd better not mention it."

"Go ahead. I'm not sensitive."

"Well," Pete said uneasily, "you said you were drinking and you know that when you do . . . you sort of don't remember things too clear."

He cleared his throat. "This drinking, Fred. It's not going to help you forget Rick Sparrow. Just look at the whole thing sensible. It was you or him."

I smiled slightly. "How would you know, Pete? You weren't there. You were catching bass in Michigan."

He nodded. "But you had plenty of witnesses."

I rubbed the back of my neck. "I still don't get it, Pete. Why would Sparrow try to kill me?"

"You were raiding his place."

"His places have been raided before, but all he ever did was smile and call his lawyer."

"It's been two years. Maybe he wasn't used to it anymore."

I shook my head. "No. He'd never get that mad."

Pete looked uneasy again. "It could have been about Helen Lawrence."

I was a little surprised. "He didn't have anything to worry about. All I did was talk to her a half a dozen times."

Pete smiled slightly. "Maybe he didn't know that."

I left Pete and went downstairs to my car. It was a little after five when I got to the Sicily Club.

I didn't see Crawford, but went to the bar and ordered a Manhattan.

Lucca joined me after a few minutes. He looked fresh and healthy and this part of the day was morning to him. He clicked his tongue. "You must have lost Pete someplace. He wouldn't let you drink on duty."

"What makes you think I'm on duty?"

He shrugged. "So it could be your day off. I don't keep track."

I put down my drink. "Where's Crawford?"

He smiled slowly. "He took a couple days off. Tell me your troubles."

I studied him. "You might know more about them than I do."

He touched his pencil-line mustache. "Not more, but as much. Crawford phoned and told me all about it. So interesting. You didn't have to do that to the poor man. If you needed money, I could have let you have a couple of bucks."

He saw the look in my eyes and quickly held up his hand. "My apologies. I'll assume that you're innocent."

He ordered a Martini. "You look hollow eyed, Morgan. Been sleeping bad?"

My eyes went automatically to the door that led to the upstairs rooms.

Lucca chuckled. "There's nothing up there now, Morgan. No tables, no wheels. The blood has been wiped off the floor and the mice are playing tag up there."

I lit a cigarette. "Figuring on going into business again? When I'm not around to stop you?"

He smiled and said nothing.

"If you're behind this, Lucca, I'll get real rough."

He sipped his Martini. "I'm not in this game. I'm just in the stands watching. But, of course, I got my favorite team."

"You shouldn't have too much to cry about, Lucca. I hear that you own the club now."

Lucca smiled slowly. "It was a partnership and I'm the survivor. So you see, Morgan, I bear no great hate for you. I even regard you with a certain fondness."

"Isn't life strange," he continued after a moment, "I thought you were here all those evenings to listen to Helen sing and all the time you were setting up the place for a raid."

I shook my head. "That wasn't why I was here, Lucca. But I'm a cop and I got eyes. You just got careless about covering things."

He looked at me with something like uncertainty. "Is that what you think, Morgan? We got careless? Maybe we thought we just didn't have anything to worry about." He emptied his glass. "You make me wonder about some things. Rick died mad . . . real mad."

I pushed aside my empty glass. "I'm here for Crawford's address."

Lucca nodded and went to the back room. He came back in a few minutes with a slip of paper. "There's something else for you to think about, Morgan. You been drinking heavy ever since you sent Rick to heaven. I hear you're the kind who forgets things when you do that. Count your money and see if you don't have any extra eight hundred dollars."

Outside I got in my car and began driving toward the south side. The new Franklin Apartments weren't far out of my way; so I decide to stop there first.

Helen Lawrence opened the door. Her green eyes went over me coldly. "What do you want?"

"To talk to you," I said.

Her lips parted slightly. "I hear you're in trouble."

"And you like the taste of that? I suppose somebody phoned the good news?"

"Lucca did me that favor. I've been sitting here and smiling about the whole thing." She stepped aside. "Come in. I like to see what your conscience is doing to you. You look terrible, Morgan."

I took a chair. "I'm wondering how much you really hate me. You were there when Rick died and you saw what happened, but you want to convince yourself that it was murder. Do you think you hate me enough to do something about it? Enough to get together with Crawford?"

Her white teeth showed. "Think about it, Morgan. Let it eat you."

"But I have other thoughts, too. Somehow, I don't think Rick was a burning passion in your life. I don't think you've got it in you to feel strong about anything but a dollar bill."

She took a cigarette from the silver container on the cocktail table. "If you're on the side of the angels, why does killing Rick bother you so much?"

"Because he was a human being.

Not too good, but not bad enough to die. I don't like to be responsible for something like that. I know as well as anybody else that I'm not going to keep crying about it forever, but that doesn't help now."

She puffed the cigarette. "Suppose Crawford and I did get together. What could you do?"

"I don't know yet. But I'll think of something that hurts."

She let a few seconds pass. "I'm the kind of a woman who always takes care of herself first, Morgan. I admit that and I'm not ashamed of it. I miss Rick. And you're to blame . . . Well, anyhow, I'm not a fool and I don't waste my time on revenge. I shed tears for a day and then I look forward to tomorrow."

She smiled. "Lucca owns the club now. He would like to own me. And after a decent month of mourning, perhaps he will."

She followed me to the door. "Don't you wish you had Lucca's money, Morgan? Just think what you could look forward to."

I grinned faintly. "Why not love me for myself alone?"

Her face was serious. "I couldn't afford that."

It was five-thirty when I got into my car. I started for the south side again, but I knew I had to stop for a drink.

I was finishing my third shot and getting ready to leave the bar when Pete walked in. His eyes took in the customers at the bar.

I raised my voice. "I'm here."

Pete hesitated and then came over.

"This is a Ripley coincidence, Pete," I said. "Three thousand bars in this town and you pick this one."

He flushed slightly. "The captain told me to sort of keep an eye on you."

"From this close?"

Pete rubbed his head. "You were in here so long I thought you might of given me the slip. I had to come in and check."

I shook my head. "How did you ever make sergeant? Would I leave without my car?"

He thought about it. "It's possible."

"How long have you been following me?"

"The Captain chased me right after you when you left headquarters."

I finished my drink and put the empty glass on the bar. "So he told you to keep an eye on me. Was that for my protection or for other people's?"

"I guess it was sort of for both reasons. He didn't say."

Pete looked at my empty glass. "I don't want to say anything, Fred, but don't you think that at a time like this you should go easy on the liquor?"

I rapped the glass on the bar. "I'm glad you reminded me. I'm still thirsty."

Pete shook his head. "I'll wait outside."

At seven-thirty, I picked my change off the bar and left.

Pete was sitting behind the wheel of my car. "I'll drive you home, Fred."

"I haven't had that many, Pete."

"Just the same, I think I ought to do the driving this time."

I threw away my cigarette. "All right, chauffeur. But not home. Take me to Crawford's place. I need a talk with him."

Pete's face was stubborn. "I think you ought to go home to bed. Get a little rest."

I jerked my thumb. "Get out."

Pete thought about it and then sighed. "All right. I'll take you to Crawford."

I got in the car and gave him the ignition keys.

He followed Sixteenth Street across the viaduct and made a left turn down into the valley. We passed the coal yards, the small factories and junk yards and stopped at the dimly lit corner of Ninth.

Pete led the way to the dirty red brick building and up the dusty steps to the second story. He stopped in front of one of the doors lining the hall and knocked.

I waited a few seconds and then tried my hand at it. "Open up, Crawford."

"He might not be home," Pete said.

"It's my guess that he's hiding behind the door."

Pete rapped again. "Open the door, Crawford. Nobody's going to hurt you."

I was ready to put my shoulder to the door when the lock clicked and the door opened an inch. Crawford peered out.

I pushed into the room.

Crawford backed away, his face pale, and his eyes flicked from me to Pete and back again. "Keep away from me."

I moved toward him, but Pete gripped my arm. "We can't have any rough stuff, Fred. I don't want you to get in any more trouble."

I shook him off. "All right. I'll try sugar." I studied Crawford. "This frame wasn't your idea. You don't have a reason for it. Whose mind is behind it?"

Some of the color was back in Crawford's face. "Nobody's behind it. Everything happened the way I said it did."

"Sure," I said. "But let's hear your answer if I make you five hundred dollars richer."

He shook his head, but I could see the interest in his eyes.

"It's worth a thousand to me."

He shook his head again.

I didn't have the money, but I thought I'd see what the words would do. "Think about two thousand."

He licked his lips. "You can't buy what doesn't exist."

My temper snapped. "Don't try to hold me up. I got an easier and cheaper way to make you remember the truth."

Pete's hand was on my arm, again. "Try it some other time, Fred."

I glared at him, but his expression was obstinate.

Then I relaxed. "All right, Pete. But you can't be my shadow forever. Crawford's going to face me alone some time."

Pete drove me home and followed me into my apartment.

I got a bottle and a glass. "Have I got your permission to drink?"

"It's your place and your liquor."

I grinned. "You're hoping that I pass out?"

He smiled a little. "Just hoping you get some sleep."

I finished the glass in a couple of swallows. "I won't fight it, Pete. I can't do any real drinking while you're with me anyway."

Pete sat down and picked up a magazine. "I'll stay awhile."

I went into the bedroom and set the alarm clock for twelve-thirty. Pete would be off duty at twelve and I doubted if Willard had anybody else assigned to watch me.

I took off my shoes and lay on the bed. Sleep came fast and I was at Lucca's again. I saw Rick at the head of the stairs and the surprise on his face. Then the animal anger flashed in his eyes as he reached for the gun.

I saw the life drop from him as my two slugs caught him and I stepped aside once more to let him roll down the stairs and sprawl dead at the bottom.

I woke up in a cold sweat and reached for the bottle. I took a big drink and let it do its work.

And this time in the sleep that came I was driving to Crawford's address again and I was alone with him. I didn't talk money; I just moved forward and his face got whiter and whiter.

When I opened my eyes, the door to my living room was open. Two silhouettes were outlined in the doorway.

I snapped on the night lamp and looked at the clock. It was twenty minutes before midnight.

Captain Willard watched me swing out of bed and sit on the edge of it.

He turned to Pete. "You were in the living room all the time?"

Pete nodded. "I never left."

"You didn't fall asleep?"

"No, sir, Captain," Pete said. "Not a second. He couldn't of got by me."

My head was pounding and my mouth was dry. I reached for a cigarette. "What's this all about?"

Willard moved into the room. "Where's your gun, Morgan?"

I indicated the chair where my suitcoat hung.

He took the .38 out of the holster and broke it open. "It's been fired."

His eyes went to the window and he moved in that direction. "There's a fire escape out here."

"Damn it, Pete," I snapped. "What's this all about?"

"Somebody shot Crawford about forty-five minutes ago."

Willard put the gun in his pocket and looked at me. "You convinced Pete that you were going to sleep. You came in here and closed the door. But instead of going to sleep, you went down the fire escape and drove to the Sicily Club. You waited in the alley for Crawford to take a cigarette break, and then you shot and killed him."

I stared at Willard. "I was asleep right here. Why would I want Crawford dead? He's no good to me if he can't talk."

Willard's eyes seemed to bore into mine. "Maybe you just think you were asleep. We all know about your drinking and what it does to your sense and memory."

He turned to Pete. "As soon as he gets his shoes on, take him to headquarters and book him."

Pete took the ignition keys out of his pocket. "We'll have to use your car, Fred. Mine's still parked near that bar."

I stopped tying my shoelaces and looked up into Willard's eyes. I started to say something, but he spoke first. "You better shave, Morgan. It won't hurt to look good."

"Captain . . ." I said.

He glared at me. "When I want you to talk, I'll let you know. Understand that?"

Our eyes held.

"All right," I said after awhile, "we'll do it that way."

He glanced at his watch. "I'll see you two at headquarters." At the door he fingered the Yale lock and looked back. "Don't let him out of your sight, Pete. That means stick with him wherever he goes."

Our eyes met and then Willard left.

I went to the bathroom and Pete followed me.

He sat on the edge of the bathtub and watched me lather my face. "I don't know what to say, Fred. Maybe it was just one of your spells and you didn't know what you were doing."

"Or I could have dreamed it."

He watched silently while I took my time shaving. When I was almost through, I spoke softly. "You claim you never heard of Crawford before. But I didn't have to tell you where he lived. You even knew which door to go to."

He had a cigarette half way up to his mouth. He stopped and waited.

I kept talking. "After I fell asleep you took my gun and went out to kill Crawford."

When I looked away from the mirror, Pete had the snub-nose .38 in his hand.

I met his eyes. "Why did you kill him, Pete? That's something I don't understand."

He smiled almost sadly. "I saw that you could have bought the truth from him, Fred. If I hadn't been there."

I stopped toweling my face. "What's it all about, Pete?"

He touched the lapel of his suit. "I'm just a dumb cop, but this is a two-hundred dollar suit."

He grinned slowly. "I've been selling my protection, Fred. To Rick and Lucca. To half a dozen other places."

He chuckled. "*You* were part of it too, but you never knew it. I told them you were my partner, Fred. It was safer that way. They might have had ideas about getting rid of me if they thought I operated alone."

I gripped the towel. "So that's why Rick tried to kill me. He thought I was double-crossing him."

Pete nodded. "After Rick died, I told Lucca that you were double-crossing me, too. And that you meant to scare him into handing out bigger money. I promised to get rid of you. Some way."

He shook his head. "You're not lucky, Fred. While I was on vacation you shouldn't have been an eager beaver." He raised the gun. "I hate to do this, Fred, but there's no other way. I'll tell the Captain that you tried to jump me."

The shot brought surprise to his face and he clutched at his right arm above the wrist. I darted forward and caught the .38 slipping from his fingers.

Captain Willard stood in the doorway. He holstered his gun. "I needed to hear it from his own lips, Fred."

The surprise was still on Pete's face as he looked at us.

"You made a slip, Pete," I said. "The Captain and I caught it at the same time."

Willard nodded. "How could Morgan have driven to the Sicily Club when you had his car keys in your pocket."

The blood was spoiling Pete's two hundred dollar suit, but he didn't find any sympathy from either one of us.

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# THE WOMEN BEHIND THE GUN

**by Steve O'Donnell**

His small white teeth showed and he repeated himself again. "I kill for money and pleasure. Aren't you going to write that down, doctor?"

I made a notation on the pad of paper.

He waited until I looked up. "You still don't believe me?" His smile got broader. "I thought you'd understand by now."

He was a delicate, thin-shouldered young man and there was a faintly discernible bulge under his breast pocket.

My pen was a bit slippery in my fingers. "Tell me what comes to your mind."

He regarded me for a moment and then brought out a silver cigarette case. "Try my brand, doctor. It's soothing to the nerves."

He lit our cigarettes. "May I regard you as a friend?"

"Of course."

He glanced at the two-drawer filing cabinet and the couch against the wall. "This is my third visit. I hope I haven't bored you?"

"Not at all."

His laugh was shrill. "Of course I have. To some extent anyway. A mere recital of insignificant childhood events. But I assure you that you will not find this session boring, whatever else you may think of it."

The cigarette seemed large in his frail hands. "I discovered that killing is really such a simple thing. Just one revolver shot and the job is done."

His light blue eyes watched me. "Murder has proved to be the answer to my financial problems. I come from a good family, doctor, and I have had the best education, but that has been all that my mother could offer me."

He adjusted the crease in his trousers. "I've killed eleven people in the last six years and I've made it a practice to know them to some degree before they died."

I waited.

"I enjoyed talking to them. Watching them and waiting for the expression on their faces when they knew they were going to die."

I exhaled cigarette smoke and picked up my pen again. "How much were you paid?"

The smile returned. "It all depended on the victim chosen and the customer's ability to pay. Anywhere from five to fifteen thousand."

"I see." I rubbed dampness from my palm. "Once your victims learned that you were going to kill them, did they ever try to buy you off?"

He giggled. "Lord, yes. I've been offered five times as much as I was hired for, but I've never succumbed to the temptation. I'm a man of honor."

I looked at my notes. "Yes. A man of honor."

He glanced at his watch. "It's four-thirty. You quit at five, don't you?"

"Yes."

His mouth twitched with suppressed mirth. "I'll remember that, doctor."

I shifted in my chair. "Your victims? Were they men or women?"

He thought about it. "Men and women."

"And the people who hired you?"

"They were all women." He amplified. "I met them in my social circle. At parties and such."

"Of course. Little receptions, teas, and the like." I looked down at my pad. "You have difficulty in getting along with men?"

"Certainly not," he snapped. "It's just that . . . that I meet women more often."

"Tell me," I said. "Do you sleep well nights?"

The smile came back. "You mean does my conscience bother me? Not the slightest, doctor. My victims never return to haunt me."

"I wasn't referring to them specifically," I said. "I meant other nightmares. Things that make you scream in your sleep and wake up in terror of the dark."

His face became expressionless. "I never dream. Never at all."

I made a few marks with my pen. "You were the youngest child in your family. There were three older sisters?"

"Yes."

"It must have been difficult."

His eyes flickered. "Why should it have been difficult?"

I shrugged. "I don't imagine that being constantly dominated by your mother and three older sisters was enjoyable."

Bright spots came to his cheeks. "I never said anything like that. If there ever was any domination, I've thrown that off. I have my own apartment. I can drink and smoke when I want to. I don't have to account to anybody."

I leaned forward. "May I try another one of your cigarettes?"

He was faintly surprised. "Of course."

I selected one and lit it. "These are really quite good."

He was flattered. "I have them made especially for me." He frowned with slight worry. "You don't think they're too mild?"

"No," I said. "Distinctly masculine." I puffed the cigarette. "You mentioned that your father died when you were quite young. Just what do you remember about him?"

His face became thoughtful. "Not too much, actually. Just that he was kind and patient. I could always go to him when there was trouble with . . ." He stopped and shrugged.

I watched some of my cigarette smoke dissolve. "If he were alive would he be about my age?"

He looked at me for a moment. "I suppose so."

I tapped ash into a tray. "Did you ever forget your mother's birthday?"

"Yes. Just once and . . ."

"There was a scene? Did she say that you were unloving? Ungrateful? Selfish and inconsiderate?"

He said nothing, but a faint line of sweat glistened on his forehead.

"And your sisters? You never forget their birthdays? Anniversaries?"

Something came into his eyes. "One of my sisters is dead."

I waited.

He licked his lips. "It was an accident."

I let a few seconds pass. "She was your first victim?"

His voice went high. "Don't use that word! I don't count Doris at all." He patted his forehead with a white silk handkerchief. "I didn't mean to kill her. But we were alone in the house and she kept nagging and nagging . . ."

The side of his mouth twitched. "I was only seventeen when it happened. She'd been giving me orders about this and that all day long and finally I couldn't stand it any more."

"Did you have trouble with the police?"

"No. They believed me. I said I'd been cleaning the gun when it accidently discharged." A gleam came into his eyes and he almost whispered. "It was so easy to get away with."

The room seemed stuffy. "It seems strange that there would be a gun in such a household as yours."

His fingertips absently touched the bulge in his jacket. "I bought it and hid it in the attic. At first I was deathly afraid of it, but then I learned to hold it and it became almost like a friend. My only friend. It was so cool and efficient and could solve so many problems."

He stopped himself and glanced at his watch. "It's almost five."

"Your watch is a little fast," I said. "We still have time."

He smiled. "Doctor, don't you realize why I'm here?"

I frowned at my notes. "You mentioned that your sisters had similar voices. Strident? Demanding?"

He nodded impatiently. "Yes. Yes, I probably did."

"And your mother too?"

He hesitated. "I suppose so."

"And you still take orders from all of them?"

He shook his head vigorously. "I'm completely free of them. I told you that."

"Yes," I said. "But you visit them regularly, don't you? They get very angry if you don't?"

His temper was close to the surface, but he pulled himself together. "I'll have to make things a bit more plain, doctor. I haven't come here as a patient."

A thought seemed to come to him. "Do your patients ever try to get you to talk about yourself?"

"Yes. Usually."

He smiled with a trace of coyness. "Suppose I already know quite a lot about you, doctor. Suppose I've actually been to your house? Seen your wife and consented to do a favor for her?"

"This sister of yours," I said quickly. "Doris. When she told you to do something, you did it. Her voice demanded it."

His eyes went to the window and he frowned. "My watch isn't slow. Not according to that church tower clock." His hand slipped inside his jacket pocket.

I got up, turned my back to him, and stared out of the window. "The time's passed so swiftly I barely noticed it." I decided to use his first name. "This has all been extremely interesting, Don."

I could feel his interest. "Really?"

I sighed. "So many people who come to me are boring. Absolutely boring. You were quite the opposite, Don."

I kept my back to him. "I realized, of course, that you had no legitimate reason for coming to me. It's obvious that you are well-adjusted, mature, and intelligent."

I thought I could turn around now.

His hand was back on his knee and he was waiting for more words he'd never heard before.

I smiled broadly. "Perhaps you were testing my professional ability. This was a lark of some kind."

He liked that particular word. "Yes. You might call it that. A lark."

"You carried it off perfectly, Don. I'd like to hear more about it." I glanced at my watch. "Perhaps over dinner." I allowed my face to become thoughtful. "I wonder if my wife is home?"

His smile was smug. "As a matter of fact I know where she is at this moment. She's at a cocktail party surrounded by dozens of people." The smile became wider. "I'm sure they could all testify to her presence, if necessary."

I rubbed my chin thoughtfully and smiled.

"The two of you concocted this little joke together?"

He giggled. "Yes. You could say that. A charming woman, your wife."

I spoke slowly and thoughtfully. "Yes. She does give that first impression."

His face showed puzzlement.

"I suppose you noticed her voice?" I asked. "A discerning man like you would."

He seemed doubtful.

"The underlying stridency, of course," I said. "The sharpness beneath that studied modulation. Surely you must have?"

He nodded slowly. "Yes. I believe . . . now that you mention it."

"Yes," I said. "And no doubt she told you some fantastic story about me. She often does that you know. What did she tell you about me, Don? That I'm an ex-bank robber? Or that I go out with other women? Or that I was a slave trader?"

He shook his head and laughed slightly. "No. Nothing so fantastic."

"Go ahead, Don. Tell me what she said. Perhaps I haven't heard the story before."

He overcame a reluctance. "Well, she simply said that you refused to give her a divorce without a settlement of over a million dollars."

I laughed. "A million dollars? Why, the poor woman hasn't a cent to her name. And as for a divorce, the facts are just the opposite. I've been pleading with her for years to let me free."

He blinked. "She's a Trent. They have millions."

I laughed again. "Perhaps some of the branches of the Trent family have, but my wife's dowry was ten thousand dollars worth of debts."

He stuttered slightly. "But that tremendous house? Those acres of grounds?"

I shook my head. "I doubt if we'll be living there at the end of this year. I can't afford to keep it up on the money I earn."

He was still dazed. "But she promised me fifteen . . ."

I sat down and smiled sadly. "Why does a man marry? I really don't know. I suppose there was some attraction in the beginning." I rubbed my eyes tiredly. "When you were talking about your mother and sisters, Don, I couldn't help thinking of my wife. They all seem to have a lot in common."

He watched me uncertainly.

"Perhaps my wife even looks like one of your sisters, Don. Gladys? Or is it really Doris?"

"I don't . . . Yes. Something like Doris."

"And the voice must be similar? You've noticed my wife's eyes too, haven't you, Don? That imperiousness? Yes, even that touch of madness."

I gave him time to work on it.

He rubbed his mouth nervously. "Yes. I believe I saw it."

I sighed. "She always seems to be giving orders. Something like Doris. Did you notice that, Don? Did she give you an order and expect you to obey it without question? Without some kind of a guarantee, shall we say, that it is necessary or that it might be of benefit to you?"

I wondered whether I should ask him for another of his cigarettes. "We psychiatrists have just as much difficulty in facing our problems as our patients. And sometimes we're powerless to do anything about them at all." I smiled tiredly. "It's been a lonely life for me, Don. Ever since the boy died. He would be twenty-three now."

I looked at my clenched hands. "Sometimes I think that if she'd been just a little kind to him . . ."

There was silence and I knew that he was watching me. The gray at my temples, the line of the jaw.

I looked up. "I admire you a great deal, Don. You've had your problems with your mother and sisters, but you faced them. That took a lot of courage."

When he spoke, his voice was almost child-like. "You don't think that I'm . . . I mean, I'm not really big and strong like some people . . . men . . . I mean my sisters, and even my mother . . . they said things . . . especially Doris."

I shook my head. "No, Don. You're a man and you have real courage. That's a rare quality."

And now I waited.

After a while he smiled almost shyly. "May I come back again, Doctor?"

"Of course, Don. As a friend."

He rose and his eyes were sparkling. "You can be free, too, Doctor."

I shook my head. "I'm afraid not, Don."

But he nodded his head vigorously. "Yes, you can." He smiled secretly. "It'll be a surprise."

At the door he turned and winked. "I'm going to a cocktail party now. I may phone you later . . . with news."

When he was gone I locked the door. It was pure reflex action. There was nothing to worry about now.

I lit a cigar to drive the taste of his cigarettes from my mouth and picked up the sealed envelope on my desk. It contained the renewal lease for my office and I'd signed it two hours ago.

I tore it up and sat back to think about the Trent millions and how many of them would soon be mine.

*Like all mothers, Mother Nature is generous. She proffers to one and all, trees and stars and — on a special occasion — a wounded, dangerous gunman, busily scurrying over the topography. For all those who now want to join the Audubon Society, the line forms right there next to the bird feeder.*

# VENUS in the TREES

**by Donald Honig**

We had heard about it on the radio. Two gunmen had attempted to hold up a bank in a small town further upstate, about fifty miles from the camp where I was working the summer as a counselor. The holdup had failed, dismally and tragically. In an exchange of shots with the bank guard one of the holdup men had been killed and the other wounded, while the guard had suffered wounds from which he subsequently died. The surviving gunman had staggered back to his car and driven off. He smashed through a road block the next day, injuring a state trooper. In the ensuing chase he had not returned any gunfire, leading the troopers to the assumption that he was unarmed. He had dropped his gun in the bank when he had been hit during the gunfight. He succeeded in eluding the troopers and late that evening they found his car abandoned in a side road. The inside of the car was splattered quite profusely with blood. He was now somewhere up in the mountains and all the tourists and resi-

dents and summer campers in the area were advised to tread carefully in isolated places, as he was wounded and considered dangerous.

For the following evening, we had planned a campfire in the mountains. We had of course been following the reports about the gunman and some of the girls were apprehensive about going up into the mountains, but we scoffed at their fears and made expansive remarks about what we would do if we encountered the fugitive. The owner of the camp advised us to call off our campfire because of the situation, but as two previously planned campfires had been cancelled because of rain and because the summer was drawing toward a close, we decided that this would probably be our last chance and we were determined not to be done out of it.

Bernie had found the spot. On his day off he had taken a walk and seen this small, brush-covered trail leading from above the culvert on the other side of the road up into the mountain. He had followed it, he said, and when it got high up it widened and became a clear trail, twisting and turning so that after awhile you couldn't see the road anymore. But the spot he found was perfect for a campfire.

We sent down to the little store down the road and bought enough franks for four couples. ("Get a few extra for Collins in case he shows up," one of the fellows said. Collins was the gunman.) And during free time that afternoon, a few of us foraged around the camp for firewood and we found behind the recreation hall these small, fat, clean-sawed logs that somebody must have intended for burning at one time or another, and we put them away near the road until night.

And it was a good night. It was just cool enough, dark with just the right crisp in the air that you don't find anywhere else but in the northern mountains. We all met in front of the dining hall at nine-thirty, after we had gotten our bunks to bed. The girls had the franks in a bag, along with the rolls, and they had the blankets, too. We walked up to where the logs were and we loaded up with them and started up the road. Bernie had a flashlight and he went up ahead with his girl, playing the white light on the road, telling us what a great spot it was, how he had happened to find it, and feeling pretty important I guess. The road here was studded with glittering mica and it was like walking on the stars. Once we got away from the camp, the cool dark and the trees and the mountains seemed to close around us, the group strung out along the road, talking to each other in loud voices, talking mostly about Collins because, despite any bravado, he was nervously prominent in our minds.

"Suppose he shows up?" Charlie asked.

"Then I'll duck out," Bernie yelled back.

One of the girls said, "It's so comforting to be surrounded by such heroes."

"What are you worried about?" Charlie said. "There's eight of us."

"Sure," I said. "He can't get more than five of us before we get him."

In a little while we saw that Bernie's light had stopped and we heard him say out in the dark, "Here it is." Roz and I took our time getting there though; nobody ever hurried on the road at night, not even to make curfew, it was so beautiful to walk there. We couldn't hold hands because of the things we were carrying, so we walked close together, not saying very much, just feeling a pleasantness inside of ourselves, as is possible sometimes when you are in the night surrounded by trees and forest sounds and your mood is right.

"Be careful," Bernie said, shining the flashlight on the ground behind the culvert. "I'll go first," he said. "Be careful. It gets rocky further up."

Roz walked next to me and we went slowly up the trail, feeling the ground carefully with our feet. With her free hand she held on to my arm. It was not an easy trail. The ground was indeed rocky, the rocks hidden under leaves and pine needles. The crickets stopped when we got near and then we could hear them begin again behind us, and whenever they stopped it was as if their suddenly hushed sounds became covertly watchful eyes. We were the last couple and the single flashlight didn't do us much good. Once I stumbled and dropped the log and we had to get down on all fours to find it again, rummaging noisily through the leaves, and Roz laughed for a moment and we stopped and I leaned forward and bent my head and kissed her, and for that moment it was very strange, kissing her in the dark mountain quiet and hearing something far over in the dark, something faint in the leaves, it could have been a chipmunk or a squirrel or maybe even Collins, but Roz didn't hear it and I didn't say anything.

When we got there the others already had their blankets spread. We made a small circle of rocks and put the logs in with some twigs and newspapers. Charlie knew how to build a fire; he was the nature counselor in camp, and we watched him do it. He crisscrossed a pile of twigs over the logs and interspersed them with paper and in a few minutes the fire began to rise, lifting itself to a certain savagely flapping height.

We spread our blanket over the leaves and sat down. Right next to us was a sort of grade, a deep falling darkness. Occasionally, you

could see a firefly flicking in and out of the trees. I saw one that I thought behaved rather unusually. It was deep in the forest, and it moved very slowly and flicked out at great intervals and then came on again almost in the same place. It could be Collins out there, I thought, out there smoking a cigarette, watching us. I was going to say something, but then I thought I had better not.

Later, we got up and found some switches to use for prongs and with Charlie's knife we sliced the bark from the tips until they were white and clean. I pronged a frank and held it in the fire until it began to sweat and burst and then Roz gave me a roll and I fixed it up for her. We sat on the blankets and ate and watched the fire, feeling the heat coming and going against our faces. The franks tasted good and the mustard was the sharpest I had ever tasted.

"The old lady in the store makes it herself," one of the girls said. "I couldn't insult her so I had to buy it."

"It tastes more like pepper than mustard," I said.

Roz liked it though, because she poured it all over her frank.

After we each had one frank, we stretched out and talked for awhile. On the other side of the fire, they sang a few melancholy songs and we listened and then the singing stopped and we listened to the crackling of the fire, watched the twigs burn down, and then the logs, and someone said that the fire was going out, but Charlie said no, that now it was just beginning to burn good. Little red sparks began popping off into the night. It became quiet, with only the fire; on the other side of it the faces took on a dreamy musing.

We got close to each other on the blanket, lying on our sides and looking into each other's eyes. I reached back and then over and brought the ends of the blanket up and covered ourselves with it and it was very snug and warm in the blanket then. I held my arm around her shoulder and she smiled up at me.

"This was a good idea," I said.

"Yes."

"You don't do these things in the city."

For a long while we just lay there looking at each other. The fire had died down now, the heat from it gone away, and it was cool again, but we were in the blanket and next to each other and nobody seemed to care that the night was falling in again. Roz closed her eyes; it wasn't to sleep, I could tell, but because she was happy. While her eyes were closed I kissed her a few times softly on the forehead and she smiled, still with her eyes closed.

The shadows from the fire grew taller, reaching up into the trees. I began to smell spruce and pine and it made me think of Christmas.

Through the branches you could see the stars, spread thickly across the sky, the way you never see them in the city. I heard Roz say, "There's Venus." It was the brightest one, although I could never find it. Roz always found it; whenever we walked on the road or sat by the lake, she would see it.

Venus shone in its cold diamondness through the uplifted branches of a spruce and we both watched it and it seemed that it was looking right back at us, through the trees and straight at us.

That was when we heard the noise in the forest. It was loud, and close. We all sat up, looking at each other. A tenseness fell around us.

"What was that?" I asked.

"A squirrel probably," Howie said.

"No," Charlie said. "It was too heavy."

"Maybe a rabbit," Bernie said.

"At the moment we're all rabbits," one of the girls said, but no one laughed.

When Charlie didn't say anything, we knew it wasn't a rabbit.

"It was probably nothing," Howie said. "Let's build up the fire again and eat some more. There's a slew of franks still in the bag."

"I don't like that noise," Bernie said.

Roz whispered to me, "If he's out there, he can see this fire for a mile." I shrugged. If he was out there, I didn't want to think about it.

"Take it easy," Howie said. "Nothing's going to happen."

We got up and built up the fire again and began cooking some more franks. We were all quiet, listening to the forest. We heard the noise again; it was right on top of us, coming toward us, something walking there, breaking the brush. The suspense didn't last very long because the man appeared from the trees; we saw him standing there. In the glare from the fire, with the shadows running up and down him, he was a terrible sight. He was tall, disheveled, his clothes torn. He looked wild. There was a snarling growth of beard on his face.

For a minute he stared at us and we at him. No one moved or spoke. The crackling from the fire sounded very loud. There was something uncannily still about him; he seemed almost a part of the forest. And there was deadness in his eyes, not even the reflection of the fire seemed able to reach into his eyes.

One of the girls asked him, "What do you want?"

"I want something to eat," he said in a low voice, not belligerent or sharp or afraid, but as if he had walked into a lunch wagon late at night.

No one moved. We were all staring at him, and he seemed to be staring back at each of us, his eyes

had a dead but yet deathless, eternal-like quality about them, like eyes in an old portrait.

"We have franks," Charlie said.

"You're welcome to them," Howie said.

He came away from the trees, nearer the fire. Getting a better look at him, we saw how drawn and tired and even resigned his face was, the lines of his mouth were taut, as from inner bitterness. A few leaves that had been clinging to his jacket fluttered off him as he came to the fire.

"I could smell them," he said, looking at the franks.

Roz was holding a frank; she had been about to bite into it when he had appeared. She handed it to me and I leaned over the fire and handed it to him. His hand was trembling. He sat down before the fire. He ate slowly, his eyes fixed upon the fire, feeling the warmth coming off it in waves. When he finished the frank, he was handed another. Although it was only half cooked, he took it and ate it. He sat there, breathing hard for a few minutes as though the eating had been a strenuous effort.

"I could smell them a mile away," he said quietly, almost reminiscently.

We watched him, and watched ourselves, sidling glances, each wondering what the other was thinking. He picked up a canteen and drank some water. Then he stared at the fire again. His eyes softened, but when one of the girls moved—merely to sit more comfortably—his eyes came up, became hard, alert, dangerous. His eyes moved around from face to face. Abruptly he stood up. I saw then the bloodstains splashed over his clothing.

"Where are you going?" one of the girls asked, more from apprehension than curiosity.

"Back," he said.

We did not ask where.

"You can have more franks if you want," Howie said.

"No," he said. He was looking over our heads now, his eyes staring down the trail into the dark. "I suppose that leads to the road."

"Yes," Charlie said.

He turned around. Without a word, he went away, back into the forest, the dark. We could hear him walking, and then the noises stopped. Bernie jumped up.

"What should we do?" he asked excitedly. "He's getting away."

"Let's get back to camp and call up," one of the girls said, jumping up. "This is serious."

"It's too late," Bernie said, stamping around on the leaves. "We should have grabbed him. We could have grabbed him."

"So why didn't you?" Howie asked.

"You," Bernie said angrily. "You treated him like a kid brother or something—offering him more franks."

Howie shrugged, looking around. "He was hungry," he said.

"We're wasting time," the girl who had got up said, her voice nagging.

"Did you see the blood on him?" one of the girls said. "I thought I'd die."

"It was his own blood," Charlie said, getting up and throwing a rock into the fire, releasing a burst of sparks.

"We let him get away," Bernie said, distraught.

"We were all afraid," one of the girls said shyly. "We were just afraid. It's no one's fault."

"But we don't even know who he is," Charlie said. "He might be a hunter, or just somebody who's lost."

"The hunting season isn't till October," the girl who was standing said. "And how about the way he's covered with blood? And if he's lost, he certainly didn't show much interest in being found. What's the matter with you?"

"Look," Charlie said, "a man—obviously in trouble—comes out of the dark. He doesn't ask us who we are. He doesn't ask any questions. He tells us he's hungry and we feed him and he goes away."

"But he's a killer," one of the girls said.

"He didn't look like a killer," I said.

"No," Roz said, slipping her hand into mine. "He looked kind of sad."

"We had no right," Bernie said stubbornly. "We had no right to just let him get away."

"We gave him a chance," I said.

"But if he's a killer . . ." Bernie objected.

"We don't know who he is," Charlie said. "He didn't choose to tell us his name. To us he was a stranger. A man who was hungry, with whom we shared some food, who went away."

Clouds came later, shutting over the sky, the stars, dimming bright Venus, closing all the cold silvery shaft of light that showed faintly the ways of the forest paths. The fire burned down and we put it out and the cold came back again, all around us. We went back to the camp. We did not talk about the stranger, nor did we mention him when we got back. Perhaps the next day our secret would be told, but not that night.

Later, it was after midnight and we were in our bunks trying to sleep, it began to rain, lightly, steadily. I could hear the rain beating through the forest like running, lonely endless running. It made me think, *We did not do him such a favor, really.*

# SUDDENLY,

## THERE WAS MRS. KEMP

**by Ted Leighton**

ONE MONTH after Walt Hannis killed his wife he received a telephone call from the woman who lived in the upstairs apartment. It was late in the day and he had just returned from work. His feet, swollen, were giving him a great deal of pain.

The phone began to ring as he was pulling off his shoes. He scowled at it, then went over to pick it up.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Hannis? This is Mrs. Kemp."

The name meant nothing to him. "What can I do for you, Mrs. Kemp?"

"Surely you remember me," said the woman. "I live in 8-B, the apartment right over yours. I was at the funeral."

Vaguely, Hannis remembered a widow who had recently moved into the building, a woman addicted to thin kimonos and bohemian clothes. She had come to his wife's funeral, crying noisily over the open coffin, and he had occasionally seen her taking the sun in the apartment courtyard. "Yes, I know who you are," he said. "What do you want?"

"I was just wondering if you could come up for a few minutes. It's really very important, and I won't keep you long."

"Well, I just got home from work, and I—"

"Believe me, Mr. Hannis, it's urgent. Just for a few minutes."

Hannis told her he'd be up shortly. He hung up and filled a glass with tap water. The apartment, small and confining, depressed him. It was good to get out of there in the mornings, away from the yellow wallpaper and the brass-legged bed in which he had spent so many bad nights. The dream about Rose was still with him, about how she had looked that afternoon just before she fell. Hannis finished the water, put the glass in the sink, and laced his shoes.

The door to apartment 8-B stood

open and Mrs. Kemp was just inside it, watching him as he finished climbing the stairs. "Come in," she said.

Hannis was puzzled. He followed her into the room. It was a duplicate of his own, but heavily decorated with beads, doilies, and ceramic trays and plates. The walls were hung with Oriental fabrics and prints that had grown old and stiff.

"Why don't I make some tea," said Mrs. Kemp.

"Okay."

He sat down, watching her move into an alcove and light a flame under a heavy copper kettle. She wasn't a bad looking woman for her age, he decided. The body was full under the pink housedress. The neck, however, was heavy with loose flesh and powdered wrinkles. He watched her, waiting for her to say something.

"You certainly get up early," she said suddenly.

"It's my job," Hannis replied. "Six every morning."

"I can hear you moving around through the floor. You usually wake me."

"Well—I don't mean to—"

"Of course not," she said. "It's just that the walls and floors are so thin." She turned from the stove and smiled at him. "A body can hear almost everything that goes on."

Walt nodded, feeling uneasy. Beside him, in a wire cage, was a small parakeet.

"I hope you take your tea strong," said Mrs. Kemp. "The way some people drink it, it's like water." She took two cups from a shelf above the sink and set them on the stove. "It must be hard getting up by yourself in the mornings," she said. "I mean, now that Rose isn't—well, isn't here." Her blue lashes fluttered in sympathy.

"Yeah, it is rather hard."

"Terrible thing about your wife," she said slowly. "They decided it was suicide at the inquest, didn't they? She jumped right before you came home from work."

"That's right," said Hannis uncomfortably. He shifted around in the chair and folded his legs.

Mrs. Kemp came into the room with the tea and gave a cup to Hannis. "Drink it while it's good and hot," she said, sipping her own. She ran a finger along the para-

*One woman can be as bad as another, and two women can be worse than one. These are lyrics from a tender love song, that by an unhappy coincidence apply to our true-life drama.*

keet's cage. "You and your wife always argued a lot, didn't you? I could hear it from up here. Fighting and quarreling."

"So we didn't get along. Maybe that's why she killed herself. I don't know." He put down the cup. "And I don't think it's any of your—"

"Of course not," she said, smiling. "But when you're a lonely woman and you have nothing to do but clean an apartment, I suppose it's a bad habit you get into, listening and watching other people."

"Frankly, Mrs. Kemp—"

"You'd be surprised what I see from my window. Really. The neighbors across the courtyard, the people out on the street. Why, just last month, when I was leaning out to clean the windows, I found I could see the window of your apartment."

Hannis got up. "I don't see any point to this."

"Sit down, Mr. Hannis," she said. Her voice was cool and even. Then she chuckled. "Your tea is getting cold. You'd better drink it."

He slumped back into his seat, watching her carefully.

"As I was saying, I found that I could see your window. And do you know, I actually saw your wife fall. Isn't that interesting?"

Hannis remained silent.

"Actually," she continued, "it was a horrible thing. Lord knows, I can still hear her screaming in my sleep. But you wouldn't know about the scream, would you? You weren't home at the time."

"All right," said Hannis. "Just what the hell are you getting at?"

The woman clucked at the parakeet. Then she finished her tea, studying Hannis over the rim of the cup. "You were home, Mr. Hannis," she said. "I saw you. And your wife didn't jump; you pushed her."

Hannis had been expecting it. He remained calm. But his palms, on the arms of the chair, were sweating. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said.

It seemed as if Mrs. Kemp hadn't heard him. She went on talking, her fingers sliding up and down one of the bars of the bird cage. "I'm sure you can imagine my surprise," she said. "Here I am, leaning out to clean my windows, and I see two people struggling by your window. Then the man pushes the woman and she falls. Well, of course, I'm not the type to involve myself in other people's affairs, so I've been very quiet about it. I wouldn't want to cause anybody any trouble." She bent down over the cage. "But then, I'm an honest woman, aren't I, Billy?" The parakeet raised its blue head. "Sure I am. Billy knows. But it costs money to keep a lady honest. Don't you think so, Mr. Hannis? There's the room rent and food—"

"This is crazy!" Hannis said, his voice shaking. "Why—why you're trying to blackmail me."

". . . clothes and doctor's bills," said Mrs. Kemp. "Terrible how much money you spend these days. Now, isn't it possible that you could give me, well, a little help? I mean, it's not asking too much; you have a job."

"I'm getting out of here," said Hannis. He stood up and started for the door. "I had nothing to do with it. You can't prove a thing."

Mrs. Kemp lifted the telephone receiver and put a finger in the dial. "I'm sure you weren't involved, Mr. Hannis. It was probably my imagination. But I do think I should let the police know about it. As a matter of civic responsibility." She began to dial.

Hannis strode to the telephone quickly and pressed the cut-off bar. He looked at her. "All right," he said. "What do you want?"

Things, Walt Hannis decided, were worse than they had been before. Rose might just as well still be alive, still shouting and clawing at him, still nagging at everything he did. The wonderful freedom that followed her "accident"—and Hannis still chose to think of it as an accident—was gone now. Rose had been replaced by Mrs. Kemp, and the latter was equally as unbearable. And more dangerous.

The monotony of his job added daily to his discomfort. He walked the hot, treeless blocks of the city, his mind never far from his problem. It was not the money. Mrs. Kemp only wanted twenty-five dollars a week. But it was the idea of what she had seen, of what her spoken word to the wrong person could do to him. And the twenty-five dollars might increase some day to thirty, to forty, to whatever she felt she needed.

To Hannis, there didn't seem to be a stopping point. He would be linked with her as long as she lived. Then it came to him, just as it had with Rose, that her life did not have to continue. That he, with his hands and with the will to use them, could solve the problem quite simply. And quite permanently.

Mrs. Kemp called him at the end of the week. Hannis was eating a sullen meal in his apartment when the telephone rang. He answered it.

"Hello," she said. "Just wanted to know when I can expect my first present."

"In a few days," Hannis growled. "Don't get too anxious."

Her laugh, over the phone, was not melodic. "I think we should set up a regular schedule," she said. "From now on, let's make it Friday of every week. You can drop it in my mailbox downstairs."

"I'll bring it up," he said.

"Very well. But I think there's something I should clear up, Mr. Hannis. A few days ago I wrote down everything I know about your wife's death."

"What! Damn it, you shouldn't have done that! If anybody sees—"

"No one will see it. I sealed it in a letter and gave it to a friend. If anything happens to me she has instructions to mail it immediately. It's to the district attorney's office."

"You're really being careful, aren't you?"

"Well, Mr. Hannis, I wouldn't want to fall from a window. If you know what I mean. The letter, I think, is rather good protection."

Hannis slammed down the receiver in reply. The stupid woman thought she had him trapped. She had taken the obvious precaution of a written letter containing the evidence. And she thought that would keep her from harm, did she? Hannis smiled. Then he sat down at the table, his appetite aroused, and finished his supper.

Later, with a bottle of wine, he lay slumped in a chair, staring up at the dim yellow walls. After the wine took effect, he could see Rose's face in a shadowed pane of the window. He poured another glass and Mrs. Kemp's face wavered over Rose's. Poor old widow, he thought, do you really think your letter can stop me?

There were a few things to be worked out, of course. Hannis realized that two deaths in the same building within a short span of time might be viewed with suspicion by the authorities. That was the greatest danger, but he had to take the chance. As to method, it would be another "accident"—not a fall from a high place, but perhaps . . .

He had her death all worked out before he went to bed that evening.

There was no one in the hallway. Hannis knocked on the door softly, mindful of the way noise carried in the cramped building. He could hear bedsprings from inside the room and then the soft pad of bare feet on the floor. Mrs. Kemp opened the door. She looked at him for a moment, her eyes focusing. The robe she had thrown over her shoulders was not quite belted.

"I didn't mean to wake you," he said, "but I owe you something."

"Are you insane? It's six o'clock in the morning." In the pale light of the hallway her face, without makeup, seemed swollen and old.

"I have to get to work," he said, brushing roughly past her into the room.

She closed the door and came after him. "This isn't funny," she said. "The next time you'll leave it downstairs in my box."

"The next time?" said Hannis. He smiled.

She tightened the robe, frowning. "All right, give it to me and get out of here."

Hannis walked into the kitchen alcove and studied the stove. It was like the one in his apartment—three burners on top and a gas oven. He opened the oven door and turned on the gas.

"What are you doing?" she said.

Hannis took a handkerchief from his pocket and began knotting it around his fist.

"Now look," she said, "turn off the oven. You'll fill this place with gas."

"You know," siad Hannis, conversationally, "there's really no reason why I shouldn't kill you, is there?"

She merely seemed impatient. "Will you turn off that oven? Just turn it off, give me my money, and get out of here."

"You don't seem very frightened," he said.

"Frightened?" She laughed, harshly. "You're the one who should be frightened. Do you think I'm bluffing about that letter? Do you think my friend won't send it?"

"I don't think you're bluffing," said Hannis. "But it doesn't matter." He tied the ends of the handkerchief around his fist. For a moment he felt sorry for her. Then he started toward her.

Her dull eyes flickered. She took a step back. "I've got a letter," she said. "I'm telling you, if anything happens to me—"

He hit her, almost lightly, on the side of her face. She fell into his waiting arms and he inspected her skin. His fist, with the handkerchief, had not left a mark.

Hannis brought a chair from the living room and set it before the open stove. He put Mrs. Kemp into the chair and rested her head inside the oven. The kitchen window was open a few inches and he closed it.

The problem of a suicide note had bothered him, but he had eventually decided it would not be necessary. The neighbors would tell the police that she was a widow, and probably didn't have much to live for.

On his way out of the apartment, he passed the parakeet in its cage. He wondered, idly, if it would also die from the gas fumes. Then he went into the hallway and closed the door behind him.

The next morning the mailman delivered his usual large stack of letters to the district attorney's office.

"Lord, it seems we get more each day," one of the secretaries complained to the carrier. "Why don't you keep a few and save us some work?"

"I might do that," said Walt Hannis. He shifted his heavy mail pouch and went out into the summer street.

# LAUGH, VICTIM, LAUGH!

by Jack Douglas

*In order to hunt, make sure to be equipped with a gun, ammunition, a trigger finger, a red cap, and a large, immobile target. Then there is sportsmanship. Not a must, it has been recommended by some.*

You never know when the really important things in your life begin. The casual making of a friend in high school leads to your career. A chance meeting with a woman on a bus gives you your wife. I am forty-three, and until last year I thought I had picked the wife, the business, the whole way of life I wanted. And it's true I had picked all these things, but no more freely than I choose to drink when I'm thirsty, and no more freely than a lion chooses to kill. I picked my way of life because, like all of us, I couldn't pick any other. And, unquestionably, things are what change a man's life. They can begin it, and they can end it.

Apropos of all this, there's George who was born without a sense of humor. We grew up together in Brooklyn, went to the same schools all the way through Columbia University. Even as a boy he was short and heavy and serious. We married women from the same block in Bay Ridge worked together for twenty years or so, and I probably never would have been bothered by his lack of humor if it hadn't been for Ralph.

Looking back, trying to explain how the whole tragic thing started, all I can remember are the little things, the irritations of twenty years suddenly growing bigger. Maybe it was the kind of business George, Fred, Max and I were in —as much as anything. The "Call and Cater" deal had been Ralph's idea. He's a Chicago man, ten years younger than George, Fred, and I, and twenty years younger than Max. He's a bachelor, too. He approached us with his idea to start a strictly telephone office-lunch business; we liked it, and took him in.

Our operation was simple: we started various ventures, got them operating well, and then sold them at a profit. The important part was to manage on a shoestring at first, keep the overhead low and the profit high. That meant we had to do a lot of the work ourselves, and had to work close together. On this particular project, things didn't go so well right from the start. The summer was cool, and the office workers didn't buy as many cold drinks as we'd expected. By the time August was nearly over, we were so far behind our profit schedule George said we couldn't double our take-out money each month the way we had expected to do. Max was the first to blow up.

"I need that money!" Max said vehemently. "I was counting on getting it."

"Well, we all got to wait awhile," George said. "It's for the good of the business."

"You been playing the horses, Max," Ralph joked. "Those nags you been losing on, maybe we could get them cheap and use them for hamburgers."

"A businessman doesn't play horses," George said seriously. "And horsemeat isn't any good for hamburgers."

That was George for you, always in character. He didn't even have an inkling that Ralph had been kidding him. And another thing about George, he wasn't one to take suggestions. He had an idea, for example, about a snazzy kind of uniform for the delivery boys; when Fred proposed a cheaper outfit, George squelched him, dictatorially. True, George's ideas were usually right, but we were all equal partners, and with business bad, Fred thought he should have the right to speak once in awhile without being sat on. Things went from bad to worse. Because George's habit of taking everything seriously and literally soon irritated Ralph so much, we all began getting annoyed by the guy. It even affected our wives. Women like Ralph. He's good looking, but that isn't the whole of it. He's one of those men who just naturally know how to talk to women. So when Ralph got angry with George, the wives took it personally.

I guess when you get right down to it, any five men working together, business not good, would begin to get on one another's nerves. So by September we were just about ready for anything—anything for a change.

My first hunting trip that season gave Max the idea of insuring all of us. Hunting and guns, they're my hobby. I didn't get into the war, so I guess the M-1's about the only rifle I never shot. My favorite's an old Mossberg I've had for twenty years, and I spent half the summer cleaning and oiling it by way of getting it ready for that first trip. When I got back to work on Monday, Max suggested we take out $50,000 insurance on each of us, to cover the big expense of having to pay off a full partner's share of the business to the widow and heirs, and to cover the time and expense of finding a new man. It was a sound idea. We saw that right away, and George said we should do it at once in case I shot myself up in Maine one week end. I didn't think that was such a pleasant thought, but it gave Ralph his idea. After the meeting, he took the three of us aside.

"I'll make that guy learn to know a joke when he sees one if it kills me," Ralph told us. "Look, we're all on edge, we're overworked. George can see that. So the next time Al goes on a hunting trip, we can sug-

gest we all go along. Then when we get George up there, we'll make him think we're out to kill him for that money. It might cure him. He'll get so scared, it might at that."

We could all imagine the look that would come on George's face as he watched his four best friends and thought they were going to kill him. I could even picture him seriously explaining why we shouldn't do it! The more I thought about it, the funnier it seemed. George didn't want to go at first, but Ralph got Ethel, George's wife, to talk him into it. The trip, just as we expected, was funny right from the start. In the first place, George really tried to get into the spirit of the thing. Ethel must have told him off good, when she got him to come up with us, because he really tried to hunt.

The night of our arrival, the four of us sat across the fire from George with our rifles. I began cleaning my old Mossberg.

"Fred," George said, "I want to talk to you about the way you've been packaging the dinners. I've been thinking. And it's occurred to me: Who needs plastic covers?"

Fred didn't even answer.

"You better clean your rifle, George," I said. "But be careful; you don't want to shoot yourself."

"George doesn't carry his rifle right," Max put in. "He could fall and shoot himself, the way he carries it. Happens all the time."

"We could sure use that $100,000 double indemnity," Ralph said.

George looked worried, made no bones about how he felt. "You fellows stay near me," he said.

Fred, finally, spoke up. "Oh," he said, chuckling, "we'll stay right beside you."

"Don't ever go out alone," I said, "not near that swamp. You know, you never could swim."

Fred laughed again. "Why even Esther Williams'd sink in there."

"That wouldn't do us any good, if George got sucked into that swamp," Max said. "We need the body to collect quick."

Believe it or not, George grinned. "Going to shoot me?" he asked. "If you are, you've got to have it figured out pretty good."

George seemed to be actually enjoying our badinage, but this turn of events didn't discourage the fellows.

Ralph observed, "An amateur in the woods has to be careful."

"One of us could shoot you," Max said, "thinking you were a deer."

Maybe it was the air of the great outdoors that did it. Anyway, George cracked a joke. He said, "I got a better plan. Put antlers on my head, gag me, run me off through the woods, and let someone else shoot me! How's that!" And he began to roar with laughter.

"Go on, George, laugh," Ralph said. He was suddenly good and mad. "I'm glad for you! Laugh! Go on, laugh!"

That outburst of Ralph's made me realize it was important that we all make George believe us, that we scare him, that he be, for our sakes, the dull, serious George we worked with every day. I could understand what had happened. It was business that George took so seriously; away from it, the change had made him try to change, and we hadn't counted on that. I was angry. I could see that the others were, too. Because it wasn't what we'd planned. Right then I wanted to scare George, about as much as I'd ever wanted anything.

"Laugh, George," Ralph said again. "We counted on your knowing we like to joke. So go on and laugh."

George stopped laughing. But he was grinning now.

"All right," George said. "Why? Huh? Why do you want to kill me?"

We were stuck for an answer. The reasons we had for the joke we were playing on George weren't good enough. When you sit in front of a man and have to tell him why you want to kill him, any little trivial reason that you might give would naturally sound stupid. When you speak of murdering someone it's got to be for a big reason, one that's important to you. Not important to the victim, but to the murderer. It's got to be the most important thing in your life, in fact. I started to think, but I couldn't think of any reason at all why I, personally, wanted to kill George.

Max said, "Fifty thousand dollars double indemnity for accident. I wrote the policies and the agreement on the double, remember? The first $50,000 goes into the business, the second $50,000 we split. I need that money. You wouldn't let me take it out."

In the flickering firelight George's round, fleshy face was still grinning.

"You're forty-four, George," Ralph said. "I'm only thirty-three. I like money."

George laughed. "Women're what you like, not money."

"Women and money go together," Ralph said, "You're wife's only thirty, a young woman. She likes her fun, likes to go out nights, go to plays and dinner and parties. I like that, too."

The firelight lighted all our faces. George's grinning face and our four serious faces. I could hear something moving in the swamp, a deer probably, and I thought of tomorrow's hunting and wondered if it wasn't time to give up the joke.

Fred was saying, "You want to know why I want to kill you? It's simply this. When I get an idea, you knock it down. I want to expand, take a chance; you never do. Because you've got the money and you run things."

Then George was looking at me, waiting impatiently for me to give my reason.

"I never shot anyone," I said, after a painfully long pause. "This

might strike you as strange, but I want to see what it feels like to kill my best friend."

George didn't say anything; it were as if he hadn't heard me. He glanced at his watch.

"Don't look at the time," Ralph said.

George wasn't grinning now. "It's late. Let's play it some more in the morning, okay?"

I knew we had him going at last.

"George," I said, "we mean it."

"The morning won't come for you, George old boy," Ralph said.

"Enough's enough," George shot back irritably. "I'm cold and tired."

"You won't be anything soon," Ralph said.

"Stop it, all of you!" George shouted angrily. "You couldn't get away with it. For one thing, Ethel knows I'm here."

"You're not thinking, George," I said. "This is going to appear to be an accident."

"That insurance policy'll look bad," George said, taking us seriously now all right.

"With all four of us having the same policy," I said, "and everyone thinking it was all your idea?"

George shouted, "It was Max's idea!"

"Sure," Max said, "but the insurance company doesn't know that. Even Ethel thinks it was your idea; she'll swear by it."

"You know you have all the ideas, George," Fred said.

George cursed us. "They'll never believe you!"

"With all four of us swearing it was an accident?" I said. "Your four best friends all broken up about it?"

"They'll know the company needs money!" George cried, sounding really desperate.

"Not on the books the company doesn't," Max said. "I know my job."

George's eyes moved from one to the other of us and I thought for a minute he was going to cry. We had him good now. He didn't really believe us, but he wasn't sure. That lack of humor, the seriousness he had always lived by, was hurting him now. I felt we'd gone far enough. I felt a small grin on my face, was ready to tell George that it was all a joke, and I looked at the others and saw the same faint smile.

Then George was on his feet, fat and grotesque in the firelight, his hands waving angrily. "Fun is fun, now I'm tired of it! You hear! Not one of you could do it! It isn't in you!"

When none of us said anything, he continued his shouting. "You couldn't kill anyone! It wouldn't do any of you any good! You think I don't know why you need money, Max? That's an expensive apartment you got for that friend of yours. You think you can pay her off and Rachel won't know?"

Max started to say something, but

George wouldn't let himself be interrupted. He was in too much of a rage to be stopped.

"You can want my wife till it hurts!" George shouted. This time at Ralph. "I've watched you, don't think I haven't. She's thirty-four, not thirty, and she's tied good and tight to me and my money and the kids. You think she's going to leave all that for a two-bit man like you?"

Nothing could stop George now. He turned on Fred: "As for you, Fred, you couldn't even run a hot-dog stand successfully. You just don't have it, Fred; you never will. That goes for you, too, Al. You kill me? Why, you don't have the backbone to kill anything except dumb animals; you never have had!"

When George stopped, though he was still shaking with rage, I don't really know what I was feeling. I was cold, I know that, very cold, and I was thinking, almost with astonishment, that the man across the firelight was a man I had known for thirty years. I say I don't know exactly what I felt because at that moment I heard footsteps. They were in the brush not far away. We all looked out into the darkness toward the sound. When we all stopped talking, the footsteps continued to come closer and soon a man walked into the firelight.

He was tall, dressed in rough hunting clothes, and with the weather-beaten face of a native of the area. He must have been at least forty-five, and he carried a single barreled Savage 10-gauge in the crook of his arm.

"Evenin'," he said.

"Good evening," I said. "Join us in some coffee?"

"You folks sure are making a lot o' noise."

Ralph smiled. "Just relaxing. We're up from New York. Sure you won't have some coffee?"

"You're scarin' the deer," the man said, "for ten miles around here."

Fred threw some wood on the fire and it blazed up at once. Ralph poured coffee and held out a cup of it to the stranger.

"Sounded like someone was real mad," the stranger said, ignoring or else unaware of the cup that was being handed him.

I laughed. "Just a little joke we were having." By this time I'd decided that our visitor was a decidedly querulous sort of person.

The stranger nodded toward George. "That feller don't seem to think it was a right good joke."

"No," George said. "I don't." In spite of what he was saying, it was quite plain he'd calmed down quite a bit.

"From what I could hear," the stranger said, "sounded like a mighty poor joke."

"For God's sake," Max said, "I should think we'd be allowed to joke with our own friend, even up here."

"Yeh," the stranger said reluctantly, "I guess so."

George laughed. "We're all getting too serious. It was just a joke, sir. They like to kid me. They're always doing it."

The man shrugged.

"I ask for it," George went on, "no sense of humor. They had me going there for awhile."

Ralph offered the man the cup of coffee again. "Here, have some coffee."

"Thanks," the man said, "don't mind if I do." The man smiled and hunched his shoulders. "Cold night."

He drank his coffee slowly and I asked about the best places to go for deer. Fred had pitched more wood on the fire. It lighted the whole forest and swamp for fifty yards around the camp. And I could feel the heat on my face.

The moon was trying to break through and as the stranger finished the last of his coffee, he observed that the hunting would be good in the morning.

We all sat near the blazing fire. The man's departure had somehow brought on a heavy, awkward silence. I wiped the oil from the breech of my old Mossberg. Of course we were all very conscious of George. And his outbursts had stayed with us like an after image. George sat there as if he wanted to apologize for losing his temper, but also as if he was still too angry to do it. Ralph suddenly started gathering up the coffee cups. He carried them to the big pan we used for washing dishes. We kept it in a stream that ran into the swamp three hundred yards away from our camp.

The fire burned high and hot. The moon broke through the clouds and all the tall, barren trees of the swamp and forest seemed to be reaching and writhing like tortured hands. I finished my cleaning and closed the bolt. As I did this, I saw that I'd put a round into the chamber. I closed the bolt almost without thinking and saw the dull brass of the cartridge case slide into the chamber.

How can I explain what I felt at that moment? There was apprehension—a consciously felt weight in my stomach. And elation. In a way, I guess I felt as I had on the day I first knew I was going to marry my wife. I closed the bolt and released the safety.

"Max," I said, "you need that money. And George knows why you need it."

Max raised his head, his eyes flat and angry. "I need it all right. No question about that."

Ralph sat down at the far end of the fire between George and the rest of us.

"How bad is it?" I asked him.

"She's young and I'm young," Ralph said. "George is only forty-four but he's old; he's killing her.

If we wait another year, it'll be too late."

The rough but worn knurl of the safety catch was under my thumb. And the bolt—the hard, silvery knob of the bolt—caught the firelight like a mirror.

Fred turned, said what he said to George, "All my life I've had a mind for business, big business." The fire, I saw, made his profile red. "I've hated you for ten years. Ten years, George, you've been holding me down!"

Even the sling of my old Mossberg was soft with age and the care I'd given it. It felt like the fine leather in the handbag I had bought for Beth the day I asked her to marry me, and George had laughed and held my arm when he said he'd be best man for me.

George ran. He was on his feet, his fat red face almost white in the light of a moon that had suddenly raced free of clouds. He ran for the forest. As he ran past Ralph, Ralph tripped him. George went down, and started scrambling up as soon as he hit the ground.

We were all on our feet. George was running back toward the fire and the heavier darkness of the swamp on the other side.

Fred swung his rifle at him like a club, cursing as he swung. Not only did George duck, but Fred lost his balance with the force of his swing and almost went down himself. George hadn't gone but a few steps when he slipped—or maybe stumbled over something—and went down again. By the time he got to his knees, Ralph was standing over him. George tried to laugh, but his mouth only twisted into a tortured grin.

"That man!" George gasped. "He knows! You can't—not now you can't."

It was then I really knew I had to kill George. Anything he might say couldn't affect me now. I stepped close to him. The smooth, cold steel of my old rifle seemed alive and warm and beautiful in my hands.

Fred said, "The stranger, he did see us."

He and Max were standing there, wavering, uncertain, and so I had to take charge.

"Go after him!" I cried. "He can't have gone far! Two of us for that guy, two for George! Getting rid of one more doesn't matter. One or twenty, it's the same thing. I don't have to tell you what this'll mean to you, Fred. And that goes for you too, Ralph."

"He went right down the trail," Max said.

"Probably's not gone a quarter of a mile," I said, still feeling that I had to sell them on this. "Fred, you want to be second-rate all your life! All I'm asking you to do is to side me. Max, Ralph, you go on after that fellow. You know what you have to do."

They hesitated, the three of them. They looked at me. I nodded to

them, urging them to action. Max picked up his rifle and then Ralph did. They ran off into the darkness of the woods.

George had already taken off, running into the swamp.

Fred and I followed him. George couldn't go far in the swamp at night, and I wanted to hunt for him, to stalk him, and the steel of my old rifle felt smooth and clean in my cold hands.

You never know when the really important things in your life begin. Trivial incidents might be the start of them: like meeting a boy in grade school or playing a joke on a friend.

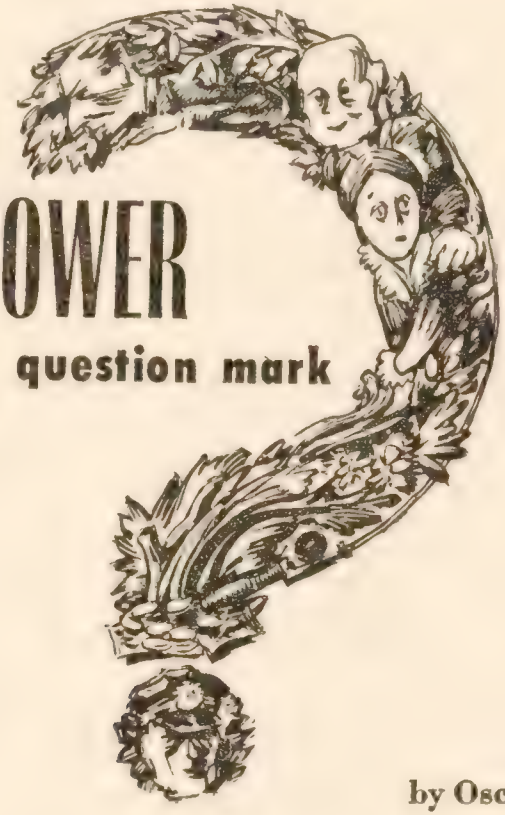
The stranger got away, of course. And he testified against us at the trial.

Now Max feels he didn't need the money as badly as he thought he had. Ralph will never have Ethel, but at least he feels she is better off, for with George gone she is free to live as a young woman should. At least, that is what Ralph says. Fred fell apart. He's safe from what is going to happen to the rest of us. In the asylum they tell me he just sits and stares at the wall and thinks he's looking at a campfire. I suppose he never did have the ability, or whatever it is that it takes.

I am scared, yes. But what bothers me most is wondering how long I had wanted to kill George. I remember sitting there by the fire that night and thinking that of the whole gang I was the one who didn't have a reason to kill George, no reason at all. But I had one all right, and that night when I said what it was, I spoke the truth. I just wanted to kill someone. No, not someone, not just anyone, but my best and oldest friend. There's a glory in that, the way I look at it, something big and really worth having done, something elemental and all my own. Maybe it's all because I missed the war. I don't know. I just don't know.

But the thing that bothers me, as I said, the thing I think about most while I'm waiting for them to come for me here in the cell is: How long had I wanted to kill George without admitting it to myself? For how many years had I walked down streets with a million other people, people apparently just like me, wanting to kill my best friend with that old Mossberg I had cleaned and oiled and loved for twenty years?

*There is nothing, nothing more treacherous than punctuation. Quotation marks, as you surely know, hold covetously to anything around which they can get their four little paws. And I'm certain that I don't have to tell you about the semicolon and the exclamation point. Now—and high time—we have the low-down on the question mark.*



# The POWER of the question mark

by Oscar Schisgall

CLINT BARRON, the high-pressure owner of the *Newton Daily Record,* came into my office as if he had run all the way from his printing plant. He spread a clipping on my desk—a full page torn out of a New York tabloid. His bony finger tapped for emphasis under each separate word of a headline:

WHAT'S HAPPENED TO
THESE CRIMINALS?
The Story of
Four Unsolved Mysteries
by Cyrus Reed

All it meant to me was that this New York newspaperman, Cyrus Reed, had made himself a bit of

extra money. He had dug into his paper's morgue and come up with the stories of four men who had disappeared during the past few years, all of them wanted for major crimes. Their pictures were in the clipping, too.

According to the caption under the photograph in the upper left corner, on which Clint Barron's finger now tapped, this man was named John Canagua. Five years ago, when he'd been assistant cashier in a Brooklyn bank, he had absconded with $400,000 and nobody in Brooklyn had seen him since.

"So?" I asked.

"My God, Chief, don't you recognize that face?"

I put on my glasses, bent over the picture. It did look familiar, but I couldn't at once connect it with anybody I knew. In the twenty-odd years I'd been Police Chief of Newton, Maine, I'd had to deal with quite a few faces.

Clint said, "That's Ned Garber!"

My stomach all but had a convulsion. Not that the picture looked exactly like Ned Garber. This man in the photograph had a moustache, and Ned didn't. The man in the photograph had dark hair, and Ned's was graying. On the other hand, this was certainly the picture of a man as heavy as Ned, who must have weighed 220, and the triangular eyes were undeniably like Ned's. In fact, now that Clint had made the association, I felt sickened by the fear that he was right.

I liked Ned. Everybody liked him. Since he'd settled in Newton, three-four years ago, he'd become one of the best liked men in town—and surely one of its most enthusiastic and most skillful fishermen. I'd seen Ned stand on a rock in front of his cottage and drop a fly into a six-inch space between two floating leaves fifty feet away. Not only that, but he was always willing to teach others how to cast, especially kids. And the kids loved him. There wasn't a day, except in winter, when you wouldn't find a few of them over at his place. I guess Ned loved them, too, or he wouldn't have given them so much time.

So, seeing this resemblance between a vanished Brooklyn criminal and the fat, jolly man who called himself Ned Garber and lived on the shores of Sandbottom Lake, I was shaken.

Also, I suddenly decided I disliked Clint Barron. Maybe it was a dislike I'd always had in a vague way; now it became crystallized. He was a snooper, a trouble-maker.

"What do you expect me to do?" I asked.

"You're Police Chief, Sam."

"This isn't evidence. It's just—a likeness."

Clint, who was long and lean, sat on the arm of the big office chair and said, "Look. I don't expect you to run out there and arrest the man on account of this picture, but

you've certainly got to investigate."

I began to tug at my lip. After all, I'd gone fishing with Ned maybe a hundred times. We were friends. We'd spent countless nights on his porch, drinking beer, talking in low voices while we looked across the lake. He had confided many things to me, including his hope that one day Mrs. Lester—Irene Lester, the widow who ran the Lester Rooming House—might be persuaded to become his wife.

With a rush of distaste, I asked Clint, "How does all this concern you, anyhow?"

"It can be a damn good story. Things like this don't happen in Newton every day."

"Nothing's *happened*. You're just guessing."

Clint Barron grinned. His lean face had something of the devil in it now. "Quit stalling, Chief," he said. "You've got to go after this, and you know it."

"Suppose I don't agree this looks like Ned. Why should I do anything?"

"Because there's a question mark in your mind. Once there's a question mark in a man's mind, he's got to do something. You know that as well as I do, Chief."

"I know nothing of the kind."

"Well, it's true. We can't stand mysteries, any of us. So now that you've begun to wonder about Ned Garber, you'll investigate. I want the exclusive story for my share in it—that's all."

I scowled again at the picture, read the whole story. It told how John Canagua must have taken the money out of the bank little by little over a period of weeks, in his pockets or in his shirt, and how he'd disappeared a few days before the auditors were due. That had happened in May of 1953.

I shut my eyes, stifled a groan. Ned Garber had driven into Newton, a stranger out of nowhere, in July of 1953. He'd hung around the Lester boarding house for a couple of months, fishing and resting, and finally he'd bought the old Williams cottage on the lake. "Perfect place for a retired man," he'd said. "Beautiful, quiet, good fishing. It's got everything including wonderful scenery and nice neighbors."

I said to Clint with pain, "We—we oughtn't to do this to him. He's a sweet guy."

"Or pretends to be."

"No, he's genuine. I know Ned. And I know how he feels about this community. I'm a witness to his will."

Clint frowned. "Will?"

"He has no family. A lot of money and nobody to leave it to."

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"So he's leaving a lot of it to Newton," I said. "$100,000 to add a wing and equipment to the Newton Hospital, $10,000 to the Newton Library. And he's setting up a fund to issue scholarships — full tuition and board every year — for two

Newton youngsters who want to go on to college."

"Where did he *get* all that dough?"

"Sold the family sawmill and timberlands up in Axminster, Ontario." It must have sounded like a lot of money to get for a sawmill; so I added something Ned had told me one evening over beers, "The people who bought his Ontario land didn't want it for timber. It's uranium country."

A skeptical laugh broke from Clint. "You swallowed that?"

"I still believe it."

"In view of this picture, don't you think you might question Ned Garber more closely? And maybe check with the police of Axminster, Ontario? And maybe get that Brooklyn bank on the telephone? Chances are they'll want to send somebody out to *see* Garber—identify him."

I looked at Clint and hated him. It was clear to me why others detested him, too. As Irene Lester had often said, he should have owned a scandal sheet, not a small town newspaper. Clint Barron had no respect whatever for reputations or feelings; all that interested him was the kind of story that would cause talk.

And I hated myself, too, for my own suspicions. But what could I do? A Police Chief has to be a Police Chief.

I asked Annie Burnside, our Long Distance operator, to connect me with the Police Chief, or whatever he was called, in Axminster, Ontario. I was kept waiting quite awhile. Finally Annie came back and said, "Sorry, Chief. There's no such place as Axminster, Ontario."

I could only stare at the telephone. "Annie, you *sure?*"

"They've got every town in Canada listed, Chief. There just isn't any Axminster."

That made me draw a long breath. When Clint heard the report, his eyes held lightning.

"Okay, Chief, we're on the right track!" he said. "Better get that Brooklyn bank!"

When I telephoned the Brooklyn bank, they said they'd send a Mr. Magruder right out; he'd worked eleven years in the cage beside John Canagua's.

Driving out to Ned Garber's a few minutes later, I was on edge. I didn't *want* to prove he was a fraud. I kept hoping that Ned would be able to explain everything rationally. But why had he claimed to come from a non-existent town?

"Now don't say anything to scare him off, Chief," Clint Barron warned. "We want this story to break in Newton. We've got to keep him here, unsuspecting, till this fellow from the Brooklyn bank comes and makes an identification."

Why Clint was going along with me, I hardly knew. I guess I felt I owed him the courtesy, since this

was all his doing. But I still hated him, and my feelings must have been clear in my voice.

"How'm I going to question him about Axminster without making him suspicious?" I asked.

"Why not let me do it?"

"You? On what grounds?"

"On the grounds that I'm running a few columns in the *Record* on our leading citizens. I want to do a column on Ned Garber."

That didn't sound unreasonable. I let it go. But I scowled all the way out to Ned's cottage. And my stomach was tight with fear.

It was a fine sunny day, with the hills across the lake looking green and gold and bright—the kind of scene that had made Newton a center for summer camps. Ned was having a merry time casting for bass. He looked like a colossus out there on the rock—220 pounds of beaming cheerfulness in wrinkled slacks and an old shirt, his graying hair windblown and disheveled.

And Irene Lester was there, too, watching all this. She sat on a log, her hands clasped around her knees —a fine-looking blonde woman who had come alive again since Ned had begun to spend time with her. She had once been married to Gus Lester, who'd run an insurance and real estate office. But Gus had died two years ago, leaving her only the boarding house on Oak Street and hardly enough money to maintain it. There were no children. She had seemed a mighty sad soul until, during the past few months, Ned's attentions had brought new spirit into her life. You could see it in her bright eyes as she watched him with his line.

In a way it was good that Irene didn't stay with us today. "Got to get back to my chores," she said after she'd greeted us. "Just dropped by with some of my plum jelly."

We watched her drive off. Then Ned took us up on the screened porch for beer.

I felt like Judas. Still, I couldn't help realizing how closely the man resembled that photograph. The round, glowing face, the laughing eyes—

"Ned," Clint said, taking a pencil and paper out of his pocket, "I'm going to do a column on you in the *Record*."

"On me?" Ned said, startled. "Who'd want to read that?"

"A human-interest piece. Folks like you, Ned."

"Uh-uh. Forget it, Clint. I don't want to be written up."

For five minutes, then, Clint argued in a friendly, persuasive tone for his "column"; and Ned, though genial, argued against the idea.

In the end Clint said with a laugh, "Hey, I'm beginning to think you've got something to *hide!*"

"No, it's not that—"

"Well, let's just stick to a few simple facts, then. No details."

Ned sipped a little beer and contemplated the glass. Maybe he de-

cided further refusal would seem suspicious, because he said, "Well, the Chief here could've told you just about everything there is to say. I come from a logging family up in Canada. My grandpa was a logger and so was my pa. Pa built himself a sawmill when I was a kid, and he did pretty well. I grew up within spittin' distance of the mill."

"The Chief tells me," Clint said, scribbling, "that was in a town called Axminster."

"Axminster, Ontario, Yep."

I looked away across the lake, afraid to meet Ned's eyes.

"Operated the mill myself till a few years ago," Ned went on. "Then this uranium craze hit Canada. I was offered a good price for my land, so I sold out, made up my mind to retire. Figured I'd drive around in Canada and the States till I saw a town I really liked. But I didn't get to drive very far." He chuckled. "Sort of fell in love with Newton. Had everything I wanted —peace, good fishing, nice scenery, and it was small enough so's you could get to know your neighbors."

Clint asked, "Were you ever married, Ned?"

"Well, ye-es." The fat man's face sobered. He looked toward the water. "Married a fine girl when I was twenty-seven. Sweet as she could be. She—got pneumonia the first winter in Axminster. That was four months after the wedding. Died in the house near the mill."

I'd never heard this before. It seemed to me, judging by the deep lines in Ned's face and the memories in his eyes, that he *must* be telling the truth. How could anyone doubt that expression or the tone?

"Never married again?" Clint asked.

"Nope."

"How about family? Brothers? Sisters?"

"Nobody." Ned Garber shook off the sadness and smiled at Clint. "That gives you just about the whole story. Except I was a soldier in the First World War. Got to see a little action in France. Nothing special. No wounds. No medals. Just a private who got off lucky."

"And your plans for the future, Ned?"

"Nothing. I aim only to go on living here, quiet and friendly, hoping folks'll like me as much as I like them. Don't know as a man could find a better way to live."

"You don't intend to go into any business?"

"What for?" Ned asked, grinning. "I got all the money I need."

Clint said almost too casually, "Don't suppose you'd want to say how much you got for that sawmill and the timber spread."

"Oh, no; we don't want to go into that."

"What was the name of the outfit that bought your place?"

"Axminster Development Company. You won't hear of 'em, though," Ned said. "They went out of business two years ago. No ura-

nium. No more investors. Maybe they should have got smart and run the sawmill."

Watching Ned Garber's friendly smile, I felt more troubled than ever. *Could* such a man be a criminal? This warmth, this simplicity—was it all a mask for a crooked, calculating brain? The question mark in my mind, as Clint had called it, was certainly a nagging annoyance.

In the midst of the interview, Ned decided to bring out more beer. "Excuse me a minute," he said and went inside. When he was gone, Clint gave me a shrewd look.

"Guess we've got everything we're likely to get," he said. "I'll have a whopper of a story out of all this—once you arrest him."

"Look, Clint," I said, suddenly angry, "I'm not making any arrest on suspicion—"

"Hell, no," Clint said, rising. He gave me that devilish grin. "I mean after the man from the Brooklyn bank identifies him."

In the morning the Long Distance telephone operator called me back. She asked, "You still want to talk to the Police Chief in Axminster, Ontario?"

I blinked at that. "But, Annie, you told me there was no Axminster—"

"The directory didn't list it. I mentioned it to the supervisor, though, and she dug deeper. Seems there *used* to be an Axminster. When Queen Elizabeth was crowned, the name was changed to Elizabeth. It's listed in my book as Elizabeth."

Now why, I wondered, hadn't Ned said so? Why hide such a thing? I had a strange, uncomfortable feeling. Maybe Clint Barron was right about the power of a mental question mark. Anyway, it was now terribly important to me to get this whole matter straightened out and put away in its pigeonhole.

So I said, "Okay, Annie. Thanks. Get me the Elizabeth Police Chief."

The man I reached had a high, nasal voice. He listened to what I had to say, then answered, "You've been misinformed, sir. We've never had a sawmill here. This is wheat country, not timber."

That made me bend forward at the desk, my whole body stiff. *"No sawmill?"*

"Never. Nearest lumber camp is a hundred miles away."

"How about this man Ned Garber?" I asked. "Does that name ring a bell?"

"Not at all. No Garbers in this town."

"I mean four-five years ago."

"Chief," the man said with a touch of impatience, "this is a village of six hundred and twenty people. I'm the whole police force. Been on this job twenty-nine years and I know every soul who's lived here in my lifetime. I tell you we never had any Garbers, no more than we ever had any sawmills."

When I put the telephone down, my hand shook. Why had Ned Garber lied? What was he hiding?

My thoughts leaped to Clint Barron. Though he must still be wondering about the non-existent Axminster, I saw no reason to pass this new information along to him. Deep down, I wanted to protect Ned—though it would have been hard, under the circumstances, to explain why. There was a good chance, I realized, that Clint Barron, with his zeal and curiosity, might himself learn about Elizabeth. The best way to avoid his prying deeper, I decided, was to call him and tell him that I had already identified the new name of Axminster; that I'd checked everything with its Police Chief. No need to say more. Not, at any rate, till I knew myself what I was going to do about this. I didn't want Clint needling me again.

But what *was* I going to do?

*The question mark's back in your mind,* I said to myself. *But you can ignore it, can't you? Nobody else knows what you know. If you do nothing about it, nobody will be hurt. Ned's a good citizen and a friend.*

But there was another side of my mind with different ideas. This side made me place a hand on the telephone.

*Where did all Ned's money come from,* I thought, *and why does he have to hide the truth about himself? As a Police Chief sworn to uphold the law, how can I just ignore this? Ned came to us from outside this state. So this is a case for the FBI to investigate. I should telephone the FBI and tell them what I've found out.*

In spite of these thoughts I sat there without moving, not picking up the phone. What should a man do in a situation like this? Stick by a friend with blind faith—or yield to that insistent question mark?

I looked at the clock. In about twenty minutes the train was due with Magruder, the man from the Brooklyn bank . . .

I was still wondering how to act, when Ned Garber himself came in with Irene Lester. He sat down in a tired way, and I saw that something had changed in him. He seemed subdued. He ran a handkerchief over his moist face and jowls, and his tongue wet his lips.

Studying that weary face, so different without its usual glow of cheerfulness, I felt the shame of disloyalty. How could I be so suspicious of a friend? And suddenly I knew what I ought to do: nothing at all. Maybe Ned was hiding something that was no crime. Therefore it was none of my business. Unless Magruder identified him as the bank robber, what right had I to meddle with his life, break into his happiness? I took my hand off the phone and decided to forget about calling the FBI.

Ned said, "Sam, something I'd like to tell you. About myself."

"You don't have to."

"Maybe not. But Irene thinks it would be better if I did. And I guess she's right." He ran a hand over his mouth. "I'm kind of tired getting panicky every time somebody like Clint Barron starts asking questions."

I sat back, glancing from the big man to Irene, knowing now that they were much closer to marriage than I'd realized. Obviously he had confided many things to her.

"First place," he said, "I don't come from Axminster, Ontario. I come from a place called Brevet, Oregon. But the rest—all about selling the mill and the timber spread —that was true."

Irene gave him a quiet, encouraging smile.

"I sold out for almost $450,000," he said. "So I got a lot of my friends together and we all got drunk by way of celebration. Crazy maybe, but that's the way it was. Somewhere along the line I got into a squabble with a man. Don't ask me why or how. I never knew. I'm normally sober and peaceable. But this night, being drunk, I lost my head and took a swing at this guy. Cracked his jaw. He turned out to be an officer who was trying to keep order. So I got two years in jail."

Having confessed this, he looked at me in an uneasy way, waiting for me to speak.

I had nothing to say. What he had done might have been drunken stupidity, but I hardly saw it as a calculated crime.

Irene said, "It could have happened to anybody."

"So, Sam," Ned went on with a sigh, "on the record I'm an ex-convict." He shook his head. "Didn't want that kind of reputation in Newton. Wanted to live here peacefully among friends. Hoped folks would like me. So—I invented the part about Axminster, where I'd once gone with my pa when I was a kid. That's the whole story, Sam. The whole story."

I believed every word of it now. And because the question mark was no longer in my mind, I felt relieved. I had an impulse to go around the desk and grip Ned's arm in a reassuring way.

But at that moment I heard a car stop outside. According to my watch it was time for Clint Barron to arrive with Magruder. So I got up and said, "Excuse me a minute." I went outside.

Magruder, stepping out of the car, was very tall and very bald—a bony man with a pointed chin and deepset, anxious eyes. We shook hands. In a low voice I told him that Ned Garber was in the office; that he could make the identification right now.

"Think you can recognize him at a glance?" Clint asked. "After five years?"

"Absolutely," Magruder said. "John Canagua and I worked side by side for eleven years. He couldn't

fool me any more than I could fool him."

Clint added, "Mr. Magruder just told me they worked in adjoining cages. Yet Mr. Magruder never suspected that money was being taken out."

I ignored this and said, "Let's go in."

When we walked into the office Ned and Irene sat where I had left them. I watched Ned's face closely. He was startled to see us all enter, but he looked at Magruder with wonder only, not with any sign of recognition.

As for the man from Brooklyn, he seemed taken aback. He glanced at me and shook his head. "This isn't John Canagua," he said.

Clint cried as if he had been hurt, "You *sure*?"

"Of course I'm sure."

I could see bewildered questions in Ned's eyes, and in Irene's, too, and I knew I'd have to explain this. But I turned now to Clint.

"Get Mr. Magruder over to the hotel," I said. "There's a room reserved for him. He'll want to clean up and rest." To Magruder himself I added, "Know how you feel about making this trip for nothing. But you understand it was mighty important to *us*."

This time Magruder smiled. "No harm done, Chief." Then he nodded in the friendliest of ways to Ned Garber, "So long," he said. "Luck to you."

When Magruder and Clint were gone, I had to tell Ned Garber the whole story. At first it amazed him and Irene; then it made them laugh out loud. And they were in the same high good humor when they left.

I sat lighting my pipe, thinking about Magruder and the friendly way he'd wished Ned luck. It were as if a veiled something had passed between them. But now I wasn't sure if I'd merely imagined that or not. I told myself I'd forget it. That Ned was okay.

Naturally, I didn't welcome Clint Barron coming in just then. He sat on the arm of a chair and peered hard at me. "Sam," he said, "wonder if you got the same feeling I did when Magruder and Ned told each other good-by."

I stared at him, "What feeling?"

"We-ell—to me it was like old friends winking at each other."

I jumped up full of fury, pointed a shaking finger at the door. "Get out of here!" I yelled. "Can't you leave me in peace? It seems all you can do is see the bad in people."

# Big, Important Day

**by Lawrence Treat**

I SWEATED through most of that day with him. Eight hours of his big, meaty paw slapping me on the shoulder, while he called me pal and ordered me around, and said I was good luck for him.

He was already on the plane that I boarded in Hawaii. He'd come from Tokyo and he'd slept for most of the trip, getting rid of a colossal hangover. He didn't wake up until we were zooming across the Pacific, bound for International Airport, San Francisco, and halfway there. It was a luxury flight, drinks on the house, and my paper was paying for it.

I was in glory, racing through the upper stratosphere, with clean blue sky above and clean blue water down below. Me, Bill Voyse, I kept thinking. Me, I'm here.

Then he stuck that paw on my shoulder and said, "Hey, you!"

I looked up, but I couldn't quite place the big, pudgy, fat-faced slob who was grinning at me. His eyes had a mean glitter; they were too tiny for his cold, bloated face. At first I thought he was drunk and I was going to push his hand away.

I didn't.

"Hey, you," he said. "You're the reporter, aren't you? They said there was one on board."

"What of it?"

"I'm Joe Spinelli."

My heart missed a beat. Spinelli. About five or six years ago he'd kidnaped seven-year-old Richie Milhoff, collected a quarter million, and then killed the kid in cold blood—and been tried and acquitted for kidnaping and murder and a few other things, because a key witness failed. The judge had given the jury a blister-

*If one is a criminal, one need not also be a boor. This truism has been taught children, at their mother's knee—which is as good a place as any—from time immemorial. Quite obviously, Mrs. Spinelli did not rear her son in the finer traditions of our country.*

ing lecture, and Mathew Ward, the D.A., had sworn to get Spinelli some day, somehow, on some charge. Spinelli had disappeared fast.

It took me a second or two before I could splutter out, "You!"

"Yeah, bo," he said. "You know me now."

"But what are you doing here? What are you coming back for? Aren't you scared?"

His laughter exploded in a roar that polluted the air and made me wince.

"You know Ward swore he'd get you, don't you?" I said. "And that the minute you step off this plane, you'll have the cops on your neck."

"So what?" he boomed. "I ain't scared of them or anybody else." He glared at me and stuck a finger in my face. "You — you're scared, you're chicken. You're a lily-livered, jelly-brained geranium with cotton in your rump. You don't understand guys like me." Then he slapped me on the shoulder. "But you're my pal; you're gonna bring me luck."

"How?"

Spinelli reached into his pocket and took out a wad of bills. He pealed off a hundred dollar note. "Here," he said. "You're working for me."

I didn't touch the bill, "Who says so?"

"I'm telling you," he said. He stuck a thumb into my ribs. "Go ahead," he ordered. "Take it."

I coughed, and I did what he told me to.

"That's my pal," he said approvingly. "And there's plenty more, later."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Tag along. I sent word ahead, my friends'll be waiting for me when I land, and I got a bodyguard all lined up. But I can use you, too. I like a couple of trained monkeys performing for me."

"Count me out," I said.

"Hell!" he said. "Get wise to yourself. I want everybody to know how I'm coming home to pick up a quarter of a million bucks, and you're the boy to dress it up for the papers."

"The ransom money?" I said, wondering if I'd heard right.

He nodded. "Every lousy cent. What do you think of that?"

I tried to get out of range of his breath, and I said, "Where is the money?"

"Stick around and you'll see," he told me. "I been waiting to come back to the U.S.A. I got the date down on my calendar and I been hanging around for a long time. If I come one day earlier, just one day, I'm wide open. But I got it all figured out. This is the day I'm safe."

I had a wild idea. I couldn't pin it down, but it was there in the back of my mind. Something he'd say, some slip, some legal loophole that might open up a minor charge —I'd catch it, I'd be able to testify.

I'd go straight to the D.A. and tell him, and Spinelli would be sunk.

"Joe," I said. "I can call you Joe, can't I?' '

"That's the monicker, pal."

"All right, Joe. If I write it up, I need all the facts. Now you knew Richie Milhoff was having a piano lesson that afternoon, because that's where you picked him up, at his teacher's house. Who told you Richie would be there?"

"I'd been watching for weeks," he said. "I had that kid's schedule all lined up. Thursdays—music lessons. With this guy who thought he was Beethoven. So I grabbed Beethoven and stuck him in the closet and tied him up, and when little Richie came along, there I was. I slapped that kid down and stuck some tape over his mouth before he could let out a yell, and then I took him out to my car and drove off. Everybody knows that; Beethoven told 'em."

"But he couldn't identify you from the witness stand; he wasn't sure any more. The D.A. was relying on him, and he folded. Why?"

"Maybe some of the boys told him what would happen if he put the finger on me," Spinelli said contemptuously. "Maybe he got scared."

I could understand that.

Spinelli bent forward and tapped my knee. "I been boning up on law," he said. "I know more than they do."

"What about the money?" I asked. "Why couldn't they find it?"

"I got rid of it too fast," he said. "Because if they'd found one buck, just one lousy little bill, they'da traced it by the numbers and had me cold."

"But where is it? In a safe deposit box, under a fake name?"

He fished in his pocket and showed me a long, flat key. "You're not so dumb, are you?" he said.

I shrugged. "It figures," I said. "But what's the gag? Statute of limitations? Has time run out on possession of stolen money?"

"It ain't stolen," he said angrily. "They paid me, of their own free will. They got a choice, fork up or don't fork up. What I been waiting for, it's for time to run out on the income tax charge, because that's where you get hurt, if you're not careful. Them T-men!"

"So that's it," I said.

Spinelli nodded, and stuck his face down and almost butted me. "It's my dough," he blurted out. "It belongs to me. The cops can check the numbers on every lousy bill. They're the same ones that Milhoff gave me, and nobody can do a thing about it."

We landed around one in the afternoon. The big plane swooped in and taxied down the long runway and stopped in front of the airport building. I was a step or

two behind Spinelli, and I followed him from the plane and through the gate.

I spotted Goose Kelley in the upper concourse. He was a small, nondescript man, the kind nobody ever noticed, and I guess that's why he was there. The hoods and gangsters and the racket boys didn't want to stick their necks out and be seen in public. But they'd sent Goose to meet Joe Spinelli, and Goose came over and said hello.

Joe grabbed him by the shoulder and said in a voice of thunder, "Where are they? What happened to them?"

"They sent me," Goose said. "They want to know what you're trying to pull. They think you're nuts."

"I come for my dough," Joe said, inflating his big chest. "What's nuts about that?"

"You're wide open," Goose said. "The D.A., he's got a file a mile long. You haven't got a chance."

"That's a laugh," Joe said. "In a half hour I'm gonna see the D.A. in my own bank. Mathew Ward and me, we're going to talk law."

"What do you know about law?" Goose asked. "You got a degree in it, maybe?"

"Listen, Pin-head, you ain't even in my league, so button your lip. The thing is, I flew my mouthpiece out to Tokyo and he gave me all the dope. I spent a solid week with him, cramming up, and I got everything down cold."

"The boys won't like this," Goose said.

"Oh, I'm sorry to offend them," Joe said with a scowl. "There ain't no one ever pulled a job like this and then told the law where it could go, and got away with it. Me, I'm the first. See?"

Joe's lips tightened and he barked the next broadside at me. "Get going, punk. Go call the cops and the D.A., and tell 'm Joe Spinelli's here and wants the whole bunch down at the Third National Bank, right away, so they can watch me pick up my dough."

Goose wanted to say something, but apparently didn't have the nerve. I repeated what Spinelli had just ordered. "I call Ward," I said. "And I call the cops. Is that right?"

"You bet. I want to pull this off in style, with all the trimmings, so you get everybody down there, and lots of publicity, see? Now beat it."

I found a phone booth and called my paper and told the old man what was happening. I could hear him reach for the glass of water, and I almost heard the pills drop in it.

"It's sensational," he said. "We got it exclusive. I'll handle everything and send a photographer down to the bank, but you stay with Spinelli. Don't lose him."

"I wish I could," I said, and hung up without explaining why I'd said what I had.

Goose had a car waiting outside

and he drove, while I sat in back with Spinelli. I told him what I'd done, and he rubbed his hands together and gloated.

"Photographers," he said, beaming. "You got the idea. Now here's what we do. First, I go get the dough, and you watch everything so you can write it up good. You say how smart I am and how they can't touch me, on account I believe in the constitution and stand up for my rights. You got it?"

"That," I said, "is a nice touch." But we didn't mean exactly the same thing.

When we reached the bank, Goose stayed with the car and Spinelli and I went inside. There, everything looked normal enough. No cops, no photographer, no sign of the D.A. The uniformed guard was helping a girl stuff packages of coins into a briefcase. At one of the desks behind a low, mahogany partition, the branch manager was talking into a phone. He glanced up as we came in, then turned and went on with his call.

Spinelli took it all in stride. "The D.A.," he said, "I guess he's a little late. Gives me time to get set. You wait here, pal, and get things organized."

I watched Spinelli walk over to the steel gate that fenced off the entrance to the vaults. With the air of a man who owned the bank, he entered the vault.

My throat was dry, and I felt worried and momentarily left out of things until Pete Casper, our chubby little camera man, breezed in. He spotted me and rushed over with a broad grin.

"Bill," he said excitedly. "Hey, Bill—is this straight?"

"You bet it is. He picked me up on the plane, and I'm still reeling."

"Where is he?"

I pointed to the vault. "In there. And, Pete, this guy knows what he's doing; he's got the nerve of a brass monkey. I don't know what the boss cooked up, but you'll want a shot of Spinelli coming out of the vault, won't you?"

Presently Spinelli appeared on the other side of the grill. He was carrying a large, steel deposit box, and he said something to the attendant who unlocked the door for him. The attendant blinked in amazement and seemed glad to get the gate between Spinelli and himself.

Spinelli marched straight over to Pete and me. "Look," he said. "You want to see it?" He flipped open the top of the box; it was crammed with currency. "Who said kidnaping don't pay?" he asked. "There ought to be a law against it."

Nobody bothered us while he strutted around and Pete took pictures, but as soon as Pete had finished, Spinelli jumped on me.

"Where's the reception committee?" he wanted to know. "I got this all planned out; I been waiting for years. If you gum the works—"

"Everything's fine," I said. "Just take it easy."

"Then where are they?"

I turned to the door, and I breathed a sigh of relief. "There!" I said.

The D.A. had arrived. Mathew D. Ward, himself.

A couple of big detectives flanked him, but they stopped near the entrance while Ward came forward alone. He was small, dapper, streamlined in build. His hair matched his mustache and his mustache matched his suit, and he carried a handkerchief folded into his breast pocket.

It was Spinelli's big moment. He stood up and rushed toward Ward, hand extended. "Matt!" he roared. "My old pal!"

Ward's mouth locked, but he held out his hand and gave Joe's a precise little pump. "Spinelli," he said in a clipped tone. "I didn't expect to have the pleasure."

"Why," Joe bellowed, "the pleasure's mine! I want to watch you squirm!"

"I did my squirming," Ward said drily, "but that's over with." He tapped the box of currency. "This is what you collected from Milhoff, isn't it?"

"You look at the numbers and make up your own mind. You got a list of the bills, haven't you?"

"You admit it's yours, but it never appeared on your tax return."

Spinelli burst out laughing. "You ought to know better than that. Six-year statute—you can't touch me on that, you're too late. I earned it—" he mouthed the words as if he enjoyed saying them—"over six years ago, and I earned it the hard way. And now, time's up."

Ward jerked his head and motioned to the two detectives. They marched forward and converged around Spinelli, and Ward said curtly, "All right, boys. Take him."

Spinelli was still grinning confidently. "Matt, they put a hand on me, they just touch me, and you get socked with a false arrest charge that's going to land you in San Quentin. False arrest with malicious intent. And assault and battery goes with it, too. I know my right, and the statute of limitations was up on the fifteenth, which was yesterday."

Ward seemed to bunch on his his heels. "Maybe you know your rights, Spinelli, but you certainly don't know the date. Because you crossed the international date line, and this is yesterday for you. Here, it's still the fourteenth of the month. See?" And he pointed to a calendar.

*The admonition contained in our title may—at first glance—go against the grain of proud young men. Perhaps it should read: Never pick on a loser—they may, you see, be in a murderous mood.*

# *Never Pick a Winner*

**by Donald Martin**

WE HAD lived across the street from the Fletchers for more than fifteen years and so I had known Willie since he was five or six. I had always found him a particularly obnoxious boy. Some of the other people in town thought him rather charming in a puckish way, probably because at twelve he was smoking large, foul cigars, and at fourteen he was caught sitting in the schoolyard at night with several of his friends drinking whiskey. Why some people find boys like that amusing is beyond my understanding, but they do. I despised Willie so intensely, in fact, that it was a pleasure, and so did my wife, Margo; but that was not unnatural for her, as she hated practically everyone, whether with reason or not—that was her nature. She always walked about with her head thrust forward. Any time you see a person like that, you just *know* that they're not ever going to have a good word for anyone.

Because I had such little use for Willie, I felt no compunctions about cheating him a bit on the sweepstakes ticket. He asked me where he could buy one and I told him I would sell him mine for five dollars. I had been buying these tickets all my life and had never won a nickel, so I did not mind selling off the ticket to Willie for a two dollar profit. He apparently didn't know the difference.

But little did I know what was to follow, how this meager slighting of honesty was to change the course of my life.

Willie's ticket turned out to be the big winner. His winnings amounted to over a hundred thousand dollars. You can well imagine the discomfort this caused me, not only from my natural envy and chagrin, but from the new haranguing that I had to endure from Margo. I think for her it was almost worth the hundred thousand or so to have something new at which to pick.

"We could have been rich," she said, her face thrust at me in that infuriating way, staring at me with

a cold, hateful eye. "We could have been sitting on top of the world."

"I'm quite aware of that," I said, not looking at her. "Quite aware." I couldn't bear the sight of her face at that moment—it was livid with rage, hate, frustration.

"You had it in your hands, right in your very hands," she shrieked. "And you let it slip through—just to cheat that boy out of two dollars. My, my, aren't you the big-time swindler, the crafty confidence man."

I was quite aware of the whole thing and felt that it hardly bore retelling. To make it all the more acutely embarrassing for me, Willie was reacting exactly as one might have expected of his kind. He was riding up and down town in his flashy new car (continually blowing the horn and making himself otherwise objectionable) and letting fistfuls of nickels and dimes fly from the windows, to the great delight of the mob of children that ran after him wherever he went.

With these ostentatious displays of wealth, Willie was naturally alienating a lot of people. He had immediately upon the advent of his good fortune, quit his job, and not very graciously either—insulting his employer and all of his other superiors. Gradually his family became quite unpopular, all because of Willie's impetuous indiscretions.

Then when word got around that I had sold the winning ticket to Willie (and, making it worse, that I had so slyly overcharged him two dollars for it) I became the object of many tart and vulgar witticisms. These I could have survived, but Margo's reproaches became more and more intolerable to me.

If I hadn't made it abundantly clear, I would like to do so now. What I was shortly to do was not done impulsively—nor of course was it necessarily an inevitable thing. Margo and I had been bickering almost since the moment we were married. In fact, when we each said "I do," I think that was just about the last thing we both agreed on. But this business with the sweepstakes ticket became the absolute breaking point.

My irritation and subsequent loss of tolerance was unquestionably heightened and intensified by my own chagrin, my own embarrassment at being an object of ridicule. Not that I am in any way trying to justify what I did, but merely that I would like to explain my position as clearly as possible and let men judge for themselves whether I could have done less.

The more she nagged me about the loss of that sweepstakes money and hurled her nasty epithets the less bearable she became. I realized what was beginning to happen inside of me. I could tell by the way my cheeks burned and my lips kept tightening, that she was driving me headlong toward the irreparable damage.

I decided that the best way to put myself out of my misery was to do away with Margo. The moment I had definitely decided upon this I had an astonishing feeling of relief, almost of gratification, as if the release of murder was nine tenths in decision.

The cleanest and most convenient way to do it, I decided, would be with poison. I could then claim that Margo had been talking of suicide and had finally been unable to further resist the temptation to see what lay across the great divide. I can testify, now that it is all over, that planning a murder is a most refreshing and exhilarating business. Never before had my mind worked with such venomous clarity. We had some strychnine in the house which Margo had once used for medicinal purposes, when her turn of mind had been hypochondriacal. I had always suspected that she had intended to feed this strychnine to me someday, so with this neat subterfuge perpetuated upon my nervous conscience I went about the business with an utterly untroubled mind.

I slipped the lethal element into her evening beverage a few evenings later and left her sipping moodily at the drink. I went from the living room to the kitchen, sat there paring my fingernails with a monstrous butcher knife, which I felt, under the circumstances, was an aptly coldblooded thing to do. When I was through I put the knife on the table and sat staring at the night beyond the window, listening to the soft plaintive passage of the wind. The house had become very quiet; I sat with self-conscious stillness, my mind at peace for the first time in years. After a long interval—I had been sitting in what was almost a trance—I began hearing the soft faroff passage of the wind again and the silence around me became positively sinister.

I got up and turned around, and then almost collapsed from shock, the coldest, cruelest, most brutal shock I ever had in my life. Margo was standing there in the doorway. Her face—it was ghastly—was distorted with pain, fury, horror; glaring at me, the color gone from it, eyes bulging with a horrible, black, insane fury.

I completely lost my senses. I should have perceived the death that was so imminent in her face, but it was like seeing a ghost, seeing before you someone whom you have just buried. My hand slapped down upon the knife and in the next moment I was rushing with it at the pale, ghastly, faltering woman—who did not utter a cry as I . . . finished . . . her.

So now I had a very real problem. Margo's body had to be disposed of, and there was the additional complication of contriving an excuse for her disappearance. This

latter did not present the formidable problem that it might ordinarily have, as Margo had no immediate family, had no one in fact except a scattering of second and third cousins in California with whom she was utterly out of contact. So there would be none of those persistent inquiries that are otherwise inevitable when a person disappears.

That evening I decided to bury my late wife in the backyard. This decision did not rise from any latent sentiment on my part, but simply because it would be the quickest and safest method of disposing of her.

I waited until about two o'clock in the morning, when I knew my neighbors would be asleep, and then went out with a shovel. It was tedious work. We have rather tall hedges around the yard—and some vines—so I was able to work with little risk of being seen. I dug the grave and then went inside and got Margo. She was waiting just where I had left her. She still had a fierce expression on her face, telling me in effect that if she were still alive she would never permit this sort of thing. Respectfully, I pressed her into her rather cramped (but hastily improvised, you must remember) quarters. Then I covered her up, smoothed the place over with the back of the shovel to make it appear as innocuous as possible and went back into the house, quite tired, but quite pleased with myself.

The following day I let it be known that Margo had left for a visit with relatives in the mid-West —Iowa, I said, which sounded like a very logical and pleasant place to be visiting. I would join her there later. And there Margo would die, and there, in the family plot I would have her interred and then come back and mourn my loss.

That was my plan. It seemed plausible enough, and, I took the liberty of thinking, rather clever. I could think of no one who would question it.

I asked for several days off at the office, explaining that my wife had taken ill. Of course my request was granted and I took the train out that evening. I spent a good deal of the night in the club car, sipping brandy and smoking a fifty-cent cigar.

I arrived the next day in a town in Iowa which I had chosen quite arbitrarily. (I had had to give some definite destination to the people at the office.) I took a room in a hotel and spent a pleasant day. The following day, with a certain sardonic pleasure, I began composing a letter to my friends at the office reporting Margo's unfortunate demise. As my pen was sorrowfully and eloquently recounting Margo's last moments there was a knock at the door. I laid my pen down and rose to answer. Opening the door I found myself confronted by two rather severe and unsmiling men.

"Mr. Yardley?" one asked.

"Yes," I said.

"We're placing you under arrest."

I was brought home that evening in an airplane, handcuffed to the thick wrist of a police officer who did not say two words the whole trip. At the moment, what actually annoyed me more than anything else was how I had slipped up, what I had overlooked.

It developed that my error had been in not reading an announcement, which that obnoxious Willie Fletcher (who had really been responsible for it all) had placed in the paper.

To explain that more fully, I must regress for a moment. Willie had, as previously mentioned, alienated everyone in town with his vulgar displays of wealth and by other tactless behavior. Well, it seems that he experienced a sudden fit of conscience. He decided to win back the amity of his fellow townsmen and, crude psychologist that he was, felt that the most effective way he could do this was by doing something for the children.

His announcement was in the paper the very day I sent Margo into the other world. But even if I had read it, the chances are I would have missed the significance. Willie's idea was to hide and to bury fifty, twenty-five dollar checks around town. He advertised it as a monster treasure hunt. And the monsters certainly hunted for the treasure. They literally tore the town apart, digging up gardens and yards, tearing down fences. Afterwards the newspapers commented editorially that six Russian divisions could not have perpetrated half the damage; but, the paper went on, the children did solve the murder of Margo Yardley.

My one consolation was that the two boys who dug up my yard in search of buried checks and who discovered Margo went into convulsions at the sight of what they had found. Unfortunately their equilibrium has since returned to them.

I write all this from the death house, having bought my way in here with a sweepstakes ticket. I received a letter forwarded to me from an alumni group who, unaware of my plight, asked for a brief biography for a yearbook they're putting together. I'm sending them this brief account of myself which, although not a biography, does cover the most vital moments of my life.

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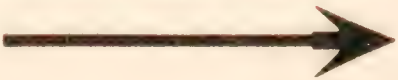

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# THE LARGE-DOLLAR HOMICIDE

by Richard Hardwick

THEY WHEELED in a slow, lazy circle, wobbling on the updrafts, and every now and then one would settle down through the thick foliage of the trees and disappear.

"What do you make of it, Pete?" Dan Peavy said.

"Huh?" I was almost dozing, sitting there with my trout pole dangling over the side of the skiff. This was the first sunny day we'd had in almost two weeks and it felt mighty good.

"Them buzzards. Look at them."

I looked up at them. "Something dead," I said.

"Yep." Dan sucked on a tooth and ran a hand through his bushy thatch of white hair. "Somethin' dead. I'd say that was a pretty neat piece of deduction."

I grinned before I realized he was pulling my leg.

"Question is," Dan said, "*what's* dead."

"What difference does that make?" I knew my bait was gone, but I didn't have the energy to reel in.

"Could make quite a bit of difference," Dan mused. "For instance, no doubt you noticed them buzzards are flyin' around right straight over old Neely Hackett's place."

I sat up. You couldn't see the house from the river, even though it stood back only a couple of hundred feet in the woods, but a ramshackle dock stuck out in the water marking the place.

Dan was right.

"Guess we better go take us a look," he said, starting to reel his line in.

There were a lot of things I had

*Sheriff Peavy returns, for where there is murder, there is he. And he, if you recall, is a salty character. You may as well know the worst. In my book a salty character includes preternatural patience, a sun-cured face, and a suggestion of chewing tobacco and wisdom.*

rather do than go messing around old man Hackett's place, but when Dan Peavy said let's do something, we did it. Dan's the sheriff of Guale County. Me—Pete Miller—I'm one of Dan Peavy's deputies.

We crossed the river and tied up at the dock, and right away we smelled it. The faintly sweet odor of decaying flesh. The smell grew stronger as we started through the underbrush toward the house.

"Something sure is dead, all right," I said.

Dan grunted and stopped walking. We had arrived at the edge of what had once been the yard of the house. The house was a sorry sight, with shutters hanging lopsidedly and most of the windows boarded over. Big hunks of the roof were gone, rotted and stripped away by the wind. One end of the broad porch had collapsed on its foundations and a massive column lay like a vine covered log before the house where it had fallen long ago. Deep shade seemed to permeate the whole scene, even though the sun filtered

down faintly through the gnarled live oaks that spread overhead.

"There, Pete," Dan said, pointing. I followed his finger. A dozen or more buzzards were pulling and tearing at something near the house, and Dan picked up a stick and threw it at them. The ragged birds hopped ponderously, gained the air, and flew away through the trees, the patches of sunlight flickering on them as they winged up through the tangle of vines and branches.

We walked over to where they had been and found the scattered remains of what appeared to be two large dogs.

"The old man had a pair of dogs," Dan said, turning and looking at the house. No sign of life had come from there since we arrived. "I don't think he woulda just left 'em layin' out here for the buzzards. Let's go in. Somethin's wrong."

We went inside and found old Neely Hackett, sitting in a chair in one of the front rooms with a hatchet lying in his lap and his head split open.

"I was afraid somethin' like this was gonna happen one of these days," Dan muttered.

I shook my head. "Kind of a bad time to happen, too."

Dan looked at me questioningly.

"That niece of his from New York, she's due in town today. Rosen, over at the Midway Motel, said she had a reservation."

For the past four or five years, this niece of Neely Hackett's had stopped off to see her uncle on her way to Miami from New York.

"Yeah," said Dan, "I see what you mean."

He poked around in some of the junk that littered the room. "I guess we better get Jerry and the coroner out here."

I looked over at the old man's body and cleared my throat. "I'll run in town and get them."

"Couple of things I got to see about at the office," Dan said. I could always tell when he was having a laugh at my expense. This was one of those times. "Meanwhile, you stay here and don't let nobody touch nothing."

He started out through the hall, but something in the room to his right seemed to catch his eye and he went in. There was a big busted place in the plaster of the wall and a crumpled newspaper was sticking out of the hole. Dan pulled it out, then reached into the opening.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" he said, holding something out for me to see. It was a pack of money. At least, it looked like money even though it wasn't exactly like any I had seen before.

"What the heck is it?" I asked.

"Greenbacks, Pete. I don't reckon you remember them. The government pulled 'em out of circulation back in the thirties."

They were a lot bigger than the bills the county paid me. The pack was all fifties.

"They worth anything?"

"Good as any other kinda money." Dan reached into the hole again and drew out another pack. He took out three or four more, then scratched his head.

"Somethin' funny here, Pete. Somethin' that don't quite figure."

He kept reaching in and pulling out money and wads of newspaper until there was a fairly sizeable pile lying there on the floor.

"Looks like that's all. See if you can find somethin' to put this in. I better take it back to town."

I found a bag and put the packs of greenbacks in it. "Looks like somebody missed what they came after, Dan."

"Looks like it, Pete. Sure looks that way."

The rain had made the old road into Hackett's place impassable, so the coroner, Dan, and Jerry Sealey —Dan's other deputy—had to come back in boats. We finished up there at the house late that afternoon and loaded old Neely Hackett into one of the boats and went back to town.

"I don't suppose either of you boys recollect," Dan said to Jerry and me when we were back at the office, "but Neeley Hackett had quite a few enemies around this county before he went off by himself the way he did. He was kind of a graspin' man. Nothing dishonest, mind you, but graspin'."

"That's how come he had all them old bills, huh?" Jerry said.

"Suppose so," Dan said, reaching across the desk to get the telephone which had started to ring. He made a couple of grunting sounds into it, then hung up and looked at me.

"That was Rosen over at the motel. I told him to let me know when Hackett's niece got in. She's there now; so I reckon we better go tell her what's happened."

We left Jerry at the office and walked the half a block to the motel. Rosen was helping take luggage out of the trunk of a white sports car.

Her name was Eva Langley and she was a real pretty thing. She took it pretty hard when Dan told her about her uncle. We all went into the motel room and she sat on the bed and cried awhile.

"I sure hate to have to ask you any questions right now, Miss Langley," Dan said, "but you might be able to help us. Would you have any idea who mighta done this? Any particular enemies your uncle mighta mentioned to you?"

She shook her head, tears running down her face streaking her makeup. "No . . . he was just a harmless old man . . ." She started crying again.

"We found about fifty thousand dollars in cash out there at the house, Miss Langley, so unless there was more than that, or the killer just couldn't find it, then robbery wasn't the motive."

She was still crying and Dan motioned to me. "If you think of anything that might help us, Miss Langley, let us know, please," Dan said.

We went back to the office. I knew Jerry had a date that night with Melba, the new waitress down at the bus station restaurant, so I knew I couldn't take her out. Just before we closed the office for the night, I called Eva Langley and asked her if she would like to go out to supper. I told her it might help to get out. Sort of get her mind off of what had happened.

She thought it was a good idea. We even went to a movie after supper and held hands. It was a pretty nice evening, considering.

The next morning, Vince Wheeler came to the office looking for Dan. Vince runs a little beer joint down near the wharves where the shrimpboats tie up.

"Dan," he said, "I heard about that money you found out to Neely Hackett's place." He reached into his pocket and tossed a wadded bill on Dan's desk. Dan spread it out. It was one of those greenbacks.

"Where'd you get this?" Dan asked him, turning the bill over curiously.

Vince smacked his fist down on the desk. "You know," he said," I feel like I'm doin' the wrong thing!"

"Listen here, Vince," Dan said, looking at him with those eyes that get grayer than the sea before a northeaster. "A man's been murdered. His head was cracked open with a hatchet and he was the only man I know of around these parts who still had any of this stuff." He picked up the bill. "Now are you going to tell me where you come by this, or am I gonna have to start *wonderin'*?"

That started Vince Wheeler talking so fast he had to stop and start over.

"Santos! John Santos! He's been owing me fifty bucks for a long time, and he come in my place a few days ago and paid me off—with *that*!"

"Where is he now?" Dan asked.

"He went out on his shrimpboat that day, but I think I seen him comin' up the river early this morning."

Dan looked over at Jerry. "Go down to the wharf and see if you can find him."

Jerry went out and Dan turned to me. "Take Vince over to the bank and get him a new fifty dollar bill for this. Tell Trimble to put this one with the others."

That's the way a case breaks sometimes. Quick. Easy. Like the last piece of a jigsaw puzzle. John Santos had been one of the men who battled Neely Hackett in the old days. Some of the stories were

pretty wild, about shooting and things like that, but I had put a lot of it down to the old timers trying to make it sound rougher than times were now. Right now, though, it looked as if they might have been the truth.

A half an hour later, Jerry got back with Santos in tow.

"What you want with me, Sheriff Peavy?" Santos demanded. "If you want see me, why you don't come yourself instead of send this—this—" he glowered at Jerry and Jerry shrugged and went over to the water cooler.

"Where'd you get that money you paid Vince Wheeler the other day?" Dan said.

Santos looked around at all of us. "Whatsa matter with it? Something *wrong* with my money? Vince take it, and I don't owe him no more! If money no good, that his worry!" he said beligerently.

"Not exactly, Santos. Now answer my question. Where'd you get that fifty dollar bill?" There was something about Dan's voice that always brought out answers.

"I—I find this money. If somebody lose, that his tough luck! *I* find and *I* keep!"

"Where did you find it?"

"I find right on my boat! Right on deck of *Mary Belle!* I wake up one morning and there is money, right on deck!" He looked around and lowered his voice. "A thousand dollar!"

"A *thousand*—" Jerry exploded.

Dan held up his hand and Jerry quieted down.

"Santos," he said, "this is the same kind of money we found down at Neely Hackett's place."

Santos stiffened and stared at Dan. The fear was there for all to see.

"I'm gonna have to lock you up, Santos. If you want a lawyer, that's your privilege. Anything you say now, we can use against you, so I'd advise you to shut up till you talk to a lawyer."

Dan got up from the desk and told me to put Santos in a cell.

"I ain't done nothing, Sheriff Peavy!" Santos protested. "I find that money! Right on deck of *Mary Belle—"*

"Right where old St. Nick dropped it outta his sleigh!" Jerry grinned. But Dan shut him up with a look.

Dan went out around lunch time and I stuck at the typewriter, catching up on a little paperwork. Jim Benson, from the *Clarion,* phoned and said somebody had told him we caught Hackett's murderer. "How come Sheriff Peavy don't let us know these things," he complained. "You know, catching murderers *is* news!"

"I'll tell Dan you called," I told him, and hung up.

I had a date with Melba that night, but I got to thinking that maybe I'd break it and call Eva

Langley. I decided to call Eva first.

"I appreciate it, Pete," she said, "but I'm a little tired, and Uncle Neely's funeral is tomorrow. By the way, is the sheriff there? I'd like to speak to him."

"He's out right now, I said. "Want me to have him call you?"

"Would you? I'll be here at the motel most of the afternoon."

I told her I would, and hung up. At least I hadn't broken my date with Melba.

When Dan came in, I told him about the calls he'd had.

"Everybody seems right pleased about the murderer being caught so quick," I said.

"Santos?" Dan said.

"Sure," I looked at him to see if he was joking. "Who else?"

"That's what I aim to check on, Pete. I hope you ain't got any plans for tonight."

Good-bye, Melba. "Nothing I can't change, I reckon."

"I'll need Jerry too, so you don't have to worry about him beatin' your time somewhere."

See you tomorrow, Melba, I thought.

"You say Miss Eva wanted to talk to me? She say what she wanted?" Dan said.

"Nope."

"You call her for me, Pete. Tell her it'll be all right for her to go on to Miami after the funeral tomorrow."

He started for the door again. "When Jerry checks in, tell him I want him here at eight o'clock tonight."

As soon as I found out where we were going that night, I didn't like it. We went down the river to the Hackett dock and Dan told Jerry to go on around the bend and wait until he heard our signal —two shots—and then to come back for us.

"Why can't I stay in the boat, Dan, and let Jerry go with you?" I asked him.

He didn't bother to answer, but just flicked on his flashlight and motioned me to follow him. I heard Jerry chuckle just before he cranked up the outboard.

Dan held the beam low and we started through the underbrush toward the late Neely Hackett's house. Somewhere in the south thunder rumbled back and forth across the sky. I hoped the rain would hold off until we got through doing whatever the hell we were going to do.

Suddenly, Dan stopped and I walked into him, almost knocking both of us down.

"What the blue blazes you tryin' to do, Pete!" he whispered back at me.

"Sorry," I mumbled, and looked past him to see why he had stopped so quickly. We were at the edge of the clearing, and so help me,

that was the spookiest sight I ever saw in my life. The moonlight shone down in shafts through the trees, striking gold off the leaves, and where it came through a beard of moss, it gave off a pale silver. But it seemed to pull back from shining on the house. Either that, or the weather-beaten planks soaked it right up like water on a blotter. The boarded windows were like bottomless black eyes, looking right at you.

"D—Dan," I said. "Why—why don't we wait out *here?*"

"You mean split up—"

"No! No—I mean you and me, right here. Whoever you're looking for pretty near has to come by here, don't they?"

I had lost even the slightest idea —I might have had—that anyone would ever come to that house, night or day. Anyone *alive,* that is.

"We'll wait inside," Dan said. I shrugged and followed him to the house. We went up on the porch and Dan fitted a key into the padlock we had put on the place after the murder. He opened the door and handed the lock to me.

"Lock the door after me and I'll let you in a window. When they come, they won't think anyone's inside."

It made sense, but when the door closed leaving me out there all by myself, I had a devil of a time getting that lock back on the hasp.

"Dan," I whispered when the door was locked. "Where do I get in?"

The seconds ticked by while I waited for him to answer.

"Dan? Dan?" I repeated, a good deal louder now. The back of my neck was beginning to feel kind of strange.

"You got to go around the back, Pete," he said finally. "All these windows in front are nailed shut. There's one in back that still works."

Then I heard it. Just a faint sound, but it was alien to the sounds of the woods. I faced back in the direction of the river and saw a yellowish light weaving through the underbrush.

"Dan! Somebody's coming!" I ran as quietly down the length of the porch as I could, what with being in something of a hurry now to get inside the house. I went around back and saw the window Dan had opened for me. I climbed in, closed and locked the window.

"Could you see who it was?" Dan said.

"All I saw was the light."

"Let's get set," Dan whispered.

We went through the darkened house and stopped just inside the front door. We waited, listening. Quiet. Quiet, except for the night noises, and then we heard a footstep on the porch. Another and another and then the sound of someone jiggling the padlock. Under the door seeped the glare of a flashlight.

The footsteps moved away, stopping, starting, examining the windows.

"Lookin' for a way in," Dan whispered.

I swallowed and nodded in the darkness.

The footsteps ceased and after a minute or two there were sounds at the rear of the house. Suddenly, there was the crash of glass as one of the panes was smashed.

"Come on!" Dan whispered, leading me into the front room to the left of the door.

I saw a flash of light somewhere toward the back of the house. Whoever it was, was in the house with us now.

"Duck down!" Dan whispered again. "They're goin' to come in here!"

I hunkered down behind a chair, and as an afterthought I slipped my revolver from the holster and held it in a sweating hand, not at all sure it would help against whatever was coming in there.

The footsteps progressed through the house, making no effort at quiet. They came on with purpose, as though they knew exactly where they were going.

Suddenly the light flared directly into the room where Dan and I were hiding. The beam flashed carelessly about then proceeded straight across the room, the dark form of its owner behind it. It stopped at the broken place in the wall where Dan had found all that money, and a hand pushed out in the light beam and began probing down in the hole. The hand pulled a loose piece of plaster away and the light bored down into the opening.

And then Dan's light flashed on and shined straight at the intruder. "Lookin' for somethin', Miss Eva?" he said slowly.

*Eva!*

She whirled, and in her eyes multiplied a hundredfold, was the fear I had felt on coming into this house. Her light clattered to the floor and all she could do was stare into Dan Peavy's flash.

"See if there ain't a lantern around here, Pete," Dan said. "A little more light will make us all feel better."

Santos was released, the new prisoner was in a cell, and Dan Peavy was sitting at his desk in the office with his feet propped up. Jerry, Jim Benson from the paper, and myself, were gathered around waiting for some answers.

"How did I know it was her?" Dan drawled.

We all nodded.

"Well, I wasn't a hundred percent sure till me and Pete caught her out there at the house. All I knew for certain was that whoever killed Hackett had plenty of time to search the house for the money. The doc said Hackett was dead for four or five days, maybe longer,

when we found him. So why didn't he—I mean, *she*—find the money?"

"I think I get it!" Jerry said excitedly. "What you mean is—"

Dan's voice raised itself just enough to drown out Jerry. "The killer found the money. She even counted it, knowing it was coming to her anyway, and then she hid it where it could be found real easy."

"But Dan," Benson said, scratching his cheek with the point of his note pencil, "why didn't she just take the money?"

"Greenbacks, 'specially a lot of 'em, would have attracted too much attention. If she inherited 'em, there wouldn't have been any trouble at all. Guess she got tired waiting for her old Uncle to die."

"Okay," I said. "But why did she go back out there?"

Dan's eyes crinkled. "Because all the money wasn't turned in," he said.

"You mean—" Jerry exploded.

"I mean I told her we found fifty thousand dollars and she *knew* there was better than eighty thousand, less the thousand she planted on Santos' boat. She musta figured we was honest and just hadn't found all of it."

"That far back you had this thing figured?" Benson asked him.

"Let's say I gambled," Dan said modestly.

"How about the body?" I asked him. "How'd she know it would be found so quick?"

"Didn't make any difference. She was due for a visit here, and if nobody had found it by then, well, she'd just go out there and discover it herself. And enough time would have gone by so that no suspicion would fall on her. The condition of them dogs and old Neely's body would have settled that."

"So that's what put you on to her," Benson said.

"There was one other thing," Dan said seriously.

"Yeah?" we all chorused.

"It was mighty damned suspicious when she took up with a homely deputy like Pete!"

Dan and Benson and Jerry were laughing, and I looked back toward the cells and thought about that night at the movie when I held her hand. I thought about that soft little hand and those two dead dogs and old Neely sitting there dead in his chair. I still found it hard to believe.

But, then, it doesn't take a very large hand to hold a hatchet.

*To run the gamut of a party, custom decrees that you wear a lamp shade and then progress to telling your boss what would better have remained buried in the darker recesses of the heart. But, as has already been observed, "All work and no play is no good for anyone named Jack."*

**by Robert Plate**

THE COLD tomato juice cut into the wool that was lining his mouth, but tom-toms continued to pound achingly against his temples. Greg eased himself tenderly into the breakfast nook.

Karen did not look up from her newspaper.

Gazing blearily at her shiny blonde hair, Greg tried to judge the gravity of her snub. Had he insulted her last night? Mocked her

secret crush on Tony Curtis, perhaps, or her odd passion for peanut butter and pickles? He frowned. There was something, he recalled, about a scarf. A blue scarf? No, it was of flaming red nylon. But what about it?

"Quite a party," he said hopefully.

"Ha."

Ha. He weighed the intonation. Bitterness or boredom? Impossible to tell. He raised a quivering cup of coffee to his lips, tried to take strength from its black fragrance.

"Quite a party," he repeated.

This time he did not even get a "ha" in response. In the distance a power mower suddenly snarled, and he winced. He bit into his toast, and the crunch sounded so alarmingly loud and savage that he hastily set it down. Smeared with raspberry jam, it lay on the plate like a bleeding wound. He shoved it out of sight behind the toaster. But its red lingered with him, like the red of the red scarf. What *was* there, anyhow, about that blasted scarf that kept intruding into his miserable hung-over brain?

Valiantly, he tried to lift the leaden silence. "George Caldwell's jokes are getting to be a bore," he said. "That one about the Volkswagen and the stripteaser has whiskers. He's told it at every party for two years. Somebody ought to tell him to bury it."

"Somebody did."

"Good! Who?"

"You."

"No!"

"Yes."

"Oh." A foggy image of George's flushed angry face materialized. And then the scarf fluttered before the face, flaunting like a bullfighter's cloak before it dissolved. "Slipped my mind," Greg said. "I had one too many."

"Uh-huh. One quart."

"George is a touchy type," Greg mused. "He wouldn't take a blunt statement very—gracefully."

"Perhaps calling him a damn repetitious old bore was *too* blunt."

"Yes. Much too." Greg sighed gloomily. "I'll apologize."

"Don't forget his shiner," Karen reminded him.

Greg considered this bit of news cautiously. Had George tanked up too much, too, and taken a tumble? "Shame about that accident," he ventured.

"Accident? Ha!"

"Don't say ha!" Greg snapped. "It makes me nervous."

"Ha! Ha ha ha!"

"What's eating you?" Greg said. He felt familiar currents of resentment and hurt beginning to flow. "Just because a guy gets a little high—"

"For one thing, you slugged George deliberately. After he accused you of chasing other men's wives—including his own."

Greg fingered the sore knuckles of his right hand. "The nerve of that windbag! I wouldn't look at his wife crosseyed." A vague worry

tantalized him. "She wasn't wearing a red scarf, was she?"

"No."

"How about our lovely hostess?"

"Ella never wears red. Clashes with her hair."

"A sweet gal," he said, and tried to forget the red scarf. "I like Ella."

"Obviously. But next time you play post office with her make sure the door's closed."

"Why?" He had no memory of a pass. "And make it a guilty secret? Nothing wrong with a harmless peck."

"Her husband didn't mind the kiss so much. It must have been your classic Roman hands that teed him off. You can thank me for holding him back. He's a bull when he gets angry."

Greg rubbed his brow. It was clammy with sweat. "Quite a party," he muttered.

"Well . . . I don't get belly laughs out of a lampshade on the head."

Greg smiled feebly. "But I was lit."

"Like the Eiffel Tower. Radiant. Until you tripped old Mr. Compton through the picture window. About then all hands combined forces, and heaved you in the pool."

So that was why his clothes had been in a damp heap on the living room floor! And why Karen had locked him out of their bedroom.

"Drunk or sober," he said, "I like to swim."

"A big disappointment to the men. They whooped like Indians about the pool, hoping you wouldn't come up."

"Don't pile it on too thick," he said. "Some of my best friends were there. I only insulted a couple."

"Oh no. You were in a rare mood, dear. Biting, vicious. You stood on a table to give a speech about the miserable defects of everybody present. The phoniness of Sam Haskell's 4-F rating in the World War Two, for instance. His face turned white—"

"Sam! Sam's my best friend. I wouldn't—"

"You *did*. But first you reminesced about the time you met Herb Gowdy with a blonde in an Atlantic City hotel. His wife gave him a look to kill. And Herb gave the same to you. And then you sneered at the pretensions of the Havemeyer's for having the longest, most glittery car in town, and at the snobbery of the Schmidlaps for using that tiny foreign car when they could afford to buy—"

"All right, all right," he said. He swallowed a bitter taste. The distant power mower still buzzed painfully into his brain. "It was just a party. They were all drunk. They'll forget."

"No they won't." Karen had put the newspaper aside, but she still would not look up to him. With downcast eyes she followed the nervous patterns traced by her finger tips across the plastic table top. "I think we'd better move away from this town."

"What?" Greg exclaimed. "If that isn't a typical idiotic female overreaction I never—"

"I'm serious, Greg. And I'm scared." Karen's voice was a troubled whisper. "Because you showed exactly what lurks behind your usual smooth, amiable smiles."

"Oh? And what's that? Go on," he said, irritated as she remained silent, "tell me."

She shrugged despairingly. "Hate."

"Come off it, Karen! I'm no case for a head shrinker, and you know it!"

"Hate," she repeated softly. "Cold, murderous hate. It's buried deep, but it's there. And it's coming out, further and further, stronger and stronger, each time you get drunk."

For a moment they were silent. He smelled the clean odor of her soap.

"Bunk," he said finally.

"I'm scared," she repeated.

"Tell me just one thing," he said. "Who wore the red scarf?"

"How nice of you to remember."

"You?"

She nodded. But the image of the scarf still tantalized. Karen and the red scarf. What was there to it? Something frightening. Something satisfying. Something he had wanted to do a long time.

"Where is the scarf now?" he asked.

"Oh, Greg! What is this about a scarf? I don't know where it is. Maybe I lost it."

"I'll look," he said. He rose and headed for the stairs.

"Incidentally," Karen said. "Why didn't you sleep in the guest room? Why break your neck on the living room couch?"

"I don't know," he said. "Damn that mower!"

"Ha!" she said. "Don't start hating the world so early in the morning."

"Knock it off, Karen," he said. "And heat up the coffee. I'll be right back."

Upstairs, in the hall outside the guest room, he clutched his throbbing head. The alcoholic mists were clearing enough to reveal murkily the events of last night: Karen had locked him out of their bedroom, and he had stumbled into the guest room, raging at her, flicking her red scarf like a whip. And there standing near the window in the guest room was a shadowed figure, and—and he was sure it was Karen! Karen, his dear wife, who was just as bad as the rest—worse, in fact, with that hypocritically angelic face. It was then that his fingers turned to fire and his arms turned to steel and the muscles in his shoulders flexed like live independent creatures exulting in the blindingly beautiful satisfaction . . .

He shuddered. He opened the door. The figure still stood before the window – Karen's dressmaker dummy. The red scarf was wound about the stub of its neck. Rolled into a strong nylon rope, the scarf

had been squeezed crushingly about the stub. Sawdust had spilled from the burst fabric to make a tiny cone on the floor.

"My God," he muttered. He yanked at the scarf, but it was knotted too tightly to yield. "I killed her—Karen!"

He stared in fascination at the damaged neck. It was only a dummy, but what difference did that make? He had *thought* it was Karen, so he had, in a very real sense, murdered Karen. And enjoyed it.

His trembling fingers took a long time to remove the scarf. He stuffed it deep into his pocket.

He went into the bathroom and splashed cold water on his face, trying to still the buzzing in his head, fighting the sickly feeling of panic.

"Get a grip on yourself, boy," he told himself. "Don't let that scary spiel of Karen's throw you. You've been stoned before. You've blown your stack before. You've punched and been punched. So what? Everything's still all right, isn't it? The world continues to spin on its axis; you've still got a job to get to. So forget it. Forget George Caldwell and old Compton and kissing Ella and all the rest. It was just another binge. *Forget it!*"

After a while the chill of the cold water quieted the noise inside his head. Almost simultaneously the distant mower stopped whining, too. The silence was a refreshing relief. Greg dried his face, examined himself in the mirror. Eyes a bit bloody, tongue coated with gray, a general air of haggardness. But, considering everything, not at all bad.

The night was over, just another meaningless blur like all other drunken nights.

He descended to the breakfast nook, where Karen was pouring coffee. He drank it appreciatively. Still unable to meet his eyes, she toyed nervously with the silver. A spoon clanged to the floor.

As she bent over to retrieve it, her thick blonde hair tumbled forward, baring her long white neck. Greg looked admiringly at the grace of that neck. It was so smooth, so slim, as fragile as a swan's. As lovely and as vulnerable as the stalk of a flower!

His bloodshot eyes stared glassily. Karen raised her flushed face, and wiped off the spoon.

"Oh, did you find the scarf?" she asked.

He hesitated, clearly puzzled, then shook his head blankly.

"No," he said.

She shrugged. "Forget about it," she said. "It'll turn up, some day."

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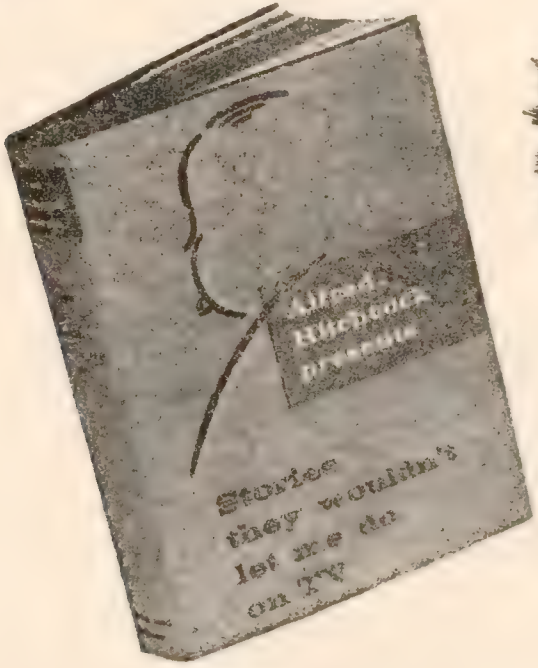


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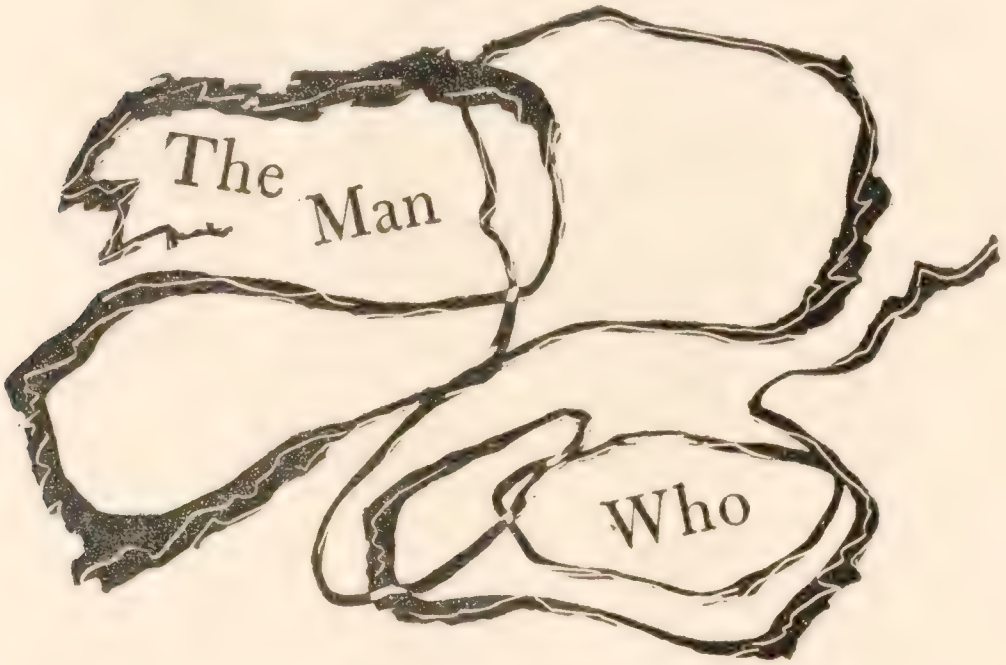
*Have you noticed that homicide is particularly habit forming? Should you for some reason want to break this habit, I urge you not to try to do it by tapering off. A clean break—authorities in blue agree—is the only way. Once you've broken the habit, not only will a rosy tint come to your cheeks, but you'll find you have a new outlook on life.*

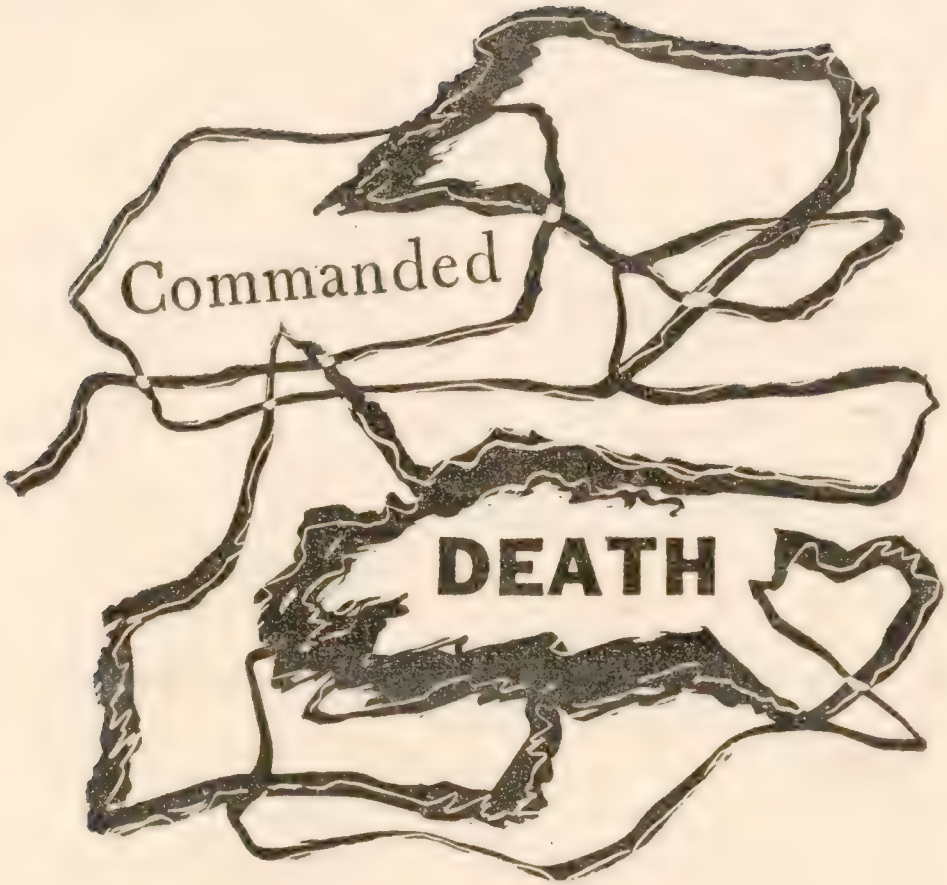



JULIAN KREBS waited for the stranger who had promised to come at eleven. It was still a few minutes before the hour, but he had already grown impatient and irritable. He paced the length of his library, pausing at almost every turn to glance at the priceless Leipzig clock standing in the corner. No, he reminded himself, that clock could not possibly be wrong. It was not yet eleven.

There was nothing to do therefore but wait. He had left the front door unlocked. The stranger would simply come in when he arrived, turn left to find the library, as he'd been instructed. He had assured his host he would be punctual.

At one minute before eleven Julian Krebs sat down in his favorite leather chair, composed himself with great effort. He must not give the wrong impression, seem

by C. B. Gilford




over-anxious. His visitor would be an employee, nothing more.

It was precisely at the moment when the Leipzig clock began to strike the hour that he also heard the sound of the front door opening. It was only a small sound, almost stealthy. He would not have heard it if he had not been listening for it. Then a silence—the hall was carpeted—and finally as he watched, the knob of the library door turning, the door opening, and a man entering, carefully closing the door behind him.

The man, of course, was a stranger to Julian Krebs. He had never seen him before, hadn't even talked to him on the telephone. Summoning him had been a cautious, devious process. And now that he was here, Julian Krebs could not help feeling a small tingling of fear at the sight of him.

He was a thin man, tall, dressed mostly in black. Or perhaps navy blue. Anway a dark color, appropriate though, considering the stranger's profession. As he came forward boldly, his face became more visible from under the brim of his hat. The face was thin too, angular, bony, with deep-sunk eyes and cavernous cheeks. If he had come upon this man unaware, Julian would certainly have been terrified.

But now he put on a front of self-assurance. He did not even rise to greet his guest. Instead he indicated the chair opposite his own. As the man sat down, the Leipzig clock struck the eleventh chime.

"I am here, Mr. Krebs," the stranger said. His voice was low, somber, a curious monotone without inflection or emotion.

Julian had rehearsed his conduct for this interview. He would be haughty, commanding, would not appear to be asking for a favor. He was paying for this man's services, as he was accustomed to pay for everything.

"What is your name, sir?" he began.

"It is not necessary for you to know my name, Mr. Krebs. You are not going to write my name on a check. You are going to pay cash."

Julian spluttered a little. He was not used to having hirelings reply to him in this manner. He considered insisting on a civil answer, then thought the better of it. Perhaps the stranger was concerned for his own safety.

"Very well," he conceded. "But I presume you are the man I sent for. You are an assassin."

The stranger made a curious little gesture with his hands. The hands were long and thin like the rest of him. "I do not like that description of myself," he said.

"But you know what I refer to. You are the man I sent for."

"Yes, I am."

"Then let's get right to business." Julian was, in fact, anxious to be finished with it. He would have been impatient in any case, but besides, this stranger made him feel eerily uncomfortable. He reached into an inside breast pocket, drew out a small photograph, handed it across the space between him and his visitor. Their hands did not touch as the object was transferred, yet Julian drew back hastily—a maneuver which almost allowed the picture to drop to the floor. But the stranger retrieved it with a swift motion, resembling the snatching motion of the claw of some great bird.

There was a brief silence while the stranger examined the photograph, carefully. "A girl," he said finally.

"Yes, her name is Sally Viston."

"She's young and pretty. And you want her dead?"

"Yes."

"That's unfortunate. I hate to see pretty young girls die."

"You mean you won't take the job?" Julian asked hastily.

The stranger glanced up from the picture, fastening his gaze upon his host. Yet his eyes were so deep-set that Julian could not quite see the orbs themselves. But he felt their pressure upon him, and again his discomfort increased.

"I'll take any job," the stranger said. "I just don't like this kind as well, that's all." He looked at the photograph again, and his tone grew sadder. "But why do you want me to kill her? What could she possibly have done to you?"

Julian resorted again to hauteur. "I don't see that that concerns you, sir," he pointed out.

"I prefer to know."

"You are being paid. You said you'd take any job. That should be enough."

"It is a little peculiarity of mine. Besides, I work best when I know all the details. The details of the motive can alter the method, you see."

Julian shrugged. He had not wanted to discuss this aspect, but his visitor was probably correct. After all, he was an expert in these matters.

"All right," Julian said. "The situation is this. My daughter Paula, who is upstairs asleep at this moment, was engaged up until a few weeks ago to a very nice, acceptable young man named Mark Banning. She was deeply in love with him. In fact, she still is. Then suddenly Mark broke off the engagement. The reason he gave was Sally Viston. She was a little nobody who came to work in his office. Now I don't say she used any unethical means of persuasion to lure Mark away from my daughter. But lure him she did. He claims he intends to marry her. Since my daughter is still in love with the young man, she is naturally broken-hearted."

The stranger relaxed a little farther into the depths of his chair. He had been studying the photograph all this while. He spoke now without emotion. "You are presuming then, Mr. Krebs, that once this girl is eliminated, the young man will automatically return to your daughter."

"After a reasonable time, yes," Julian answered with complete conviction. "Of course, that is my worry, not yours."

The stranger shook his head sadly. "It would be too bad," he said softly, "if I were to kill this girl—if we were to sacrifice this young life—and then fail to accomplish our purpose."

Julian almost snorted. "I didn't expect," he said, "to find a hired killer who would be sentimental."

The visitor took no offense. "I'm sorry, Mr. Krebs, but I do have my peculiarities."

Julian stood up, walked to the fireplace, then assumed a pose with his back to it, letting the flame warm him for a moment. The heat

felt wonderfully good, for it seemed —perhaps though it was only his imagination—that the room had somehow grown colder since the stranger's entrance.

"I have a suggestion," he announced to the dark, silent figure still sitting in the chair. "A suggestion as to the method you should employ, which I expect to aid me with my part of the problem, and which would also perhaps help you to ease your conscience."

The stranger did not glance up. "I'm listening, Mr. Krebs," he said. "Continue."

"Well, I don't want this Viston girl killed in any crude, obvious manner. Because that might very well defeat my purpose. Mark Banning might be so shocked and saddened by the girl's violent death that he might react in some other way than returning to Paula. He's rather an emotional young man anyway. So I propose that Sally Viston be disposed of in some fashion that would also discredit her with Mark."

The stranger nodded. "Go on, Mr. Krebs."

"You would kill her, of course. I'll leave the precise method to your discretion. But I suggest you do away with the body somehow, make it an undiscovered murder. And leave a note to Mark Banning perhaps. A note to Mark Banning telling him that she had run away with another man, for instance. I'm sure you could find means to persuade Sally Viston to write such a note."

"Yes, I could," the stranger replied simply.

"Then there's no more to discuss. The girl lives alone in an apartment in the Wellington Arms. Now the sooner the better, of course. Before she has a chance to actually marry young Banning." Julian reached into an inner pocket once again and drew out a rather thick envelope. He walked across the rug and handed it to his visitor.

The man rose from his chair to accept it. He did not open the envelope. He merely thrust it inside his overcoat. "You can depend on me, Mr. Krebs," he said.

"That's good," Julian replied, anxious for the fellow to be gone.

"But I wonder . . ."

"What?" Julian was impatient.

"You are trying to buy happiness for yourself and your daughter. There is an old saying . . ."

"I'm not paying for your advice."

The stranger shrugged. It was a peculiar gesture on him, a thing he did only with his shoulders, while his face remained impassive. "You are right, Mr. Krebs," he said. "It is none of my business."

Then he turned and walked out. Julian did not accompany him, but stood there, listening, till he heard the front door close.

It was a late Sunday afternoon in May, and Julian Krebs was poring

over the financial pages, when Paula burst into the library. "Daddy!" she shouted at him from the doorway.

He re-adjusted his glasses on his nose to get a better look at her. And a thrill went through him when he saw her face. Never had he seen her look so happy. She was a pretty girl under ordinary circumstances, with her dead mother's dark hair and clear skin and hazel eyes, but at this moment she was radiantly beautiful. She rushed across the room and threw herself on her knees in front of him.

"Daddy, guess what!"

He pretended to be dense. "What, my darling?"

"I'm engaged to Mark again!" she announced, proudly.

"Really?"

"And we're going to be married next month. Definitely. I'm going to be a June bride!"

"Well, well."

"Daddy, aren't you happy for me?"

He patted her hair affectionately. "I'm very happy for you," he told her.

Julian had suggested on their return from their long honeymoon abroad that they come and stay in his big, almost empty house till they found something suitable of their own. Mark hadn't seemed fond of such an arrangement, but Paula preferred it, so that's the way it had been. Julian hadn't insisted on it himself. He was not trying to retain a hold on his daughter. He was merely trying to be helpful. And he certainly hadn't planned it so that he could spy and eavesdrop on them. But when the noise they made was so loud and obvious, and when a father is concerned for his daughter, wasn't it natural that he should hear? Even try to hear? To listen?

He was headed downstairs, because on a chilly October evening, he liked the warmth and cheer of his fireplace in the library. But going downstairs took him past their bedroom, and from behind their door he heard voices. He paused to listen.

Paula's voice. "Mark, you don't love me."

"I didn't say that, Paula. I have never once said it."

"But I know. A woman knows."

"That's ridiculous. Haven't I tried to . . ."

"Oh yes, you've tried. I don't say you're cruel, Mark. Maybe you've tried as hard as you can. But trying isn't enough. It isn't the real thing."

"What do you want me to do? What do you expect?"

"Mark, a wife expects her husband to make love to her."

"I've done that . . ."

"Not for a long time. I've counted the days, Mark. So I know. I know how long it's been since you even touched me . . ."

Julian wanted to go on his way,

to go downstairs and huddle beside his fire. But he couldn't force himself to leave this spot. And there was a chill in him that no fire could thaw.

"Paula, there are times . . ."

"What times? Times when a man gets tired of his wife? Yes, I realize that. There were those times before. But how long are those times supposed to last? And mightn't there be one of those times that lasts forever and forever?"

"Paula, you're imagining . . ."

"Am I? You're not tired of me, Mark?"

"No, it isn't that at all."

There was a long silence. Julian, listening outside the room, felt the horror of that silence as strongly as his daughter must have felt it.

"Then it's something worse, isn't it, Mark?"

"Paula, listen . . ."

"You've never forgotten Sally Viston, have you?"

Silence again, long and damning. No defense, no denial, not even for the sake of politeness and a wife's pride. A silence that spoke a more horrible truth than any words.

Julian could listen no more. He left the door, groped his way blindly down the stairs and into the haven of the library. He sat heavily in his favorite leather chair, closed his eyes, and tried not to think.

He'd been sitting there for a long time when he heard the door open and looked up to see Paula standing there. At the sight of her, her dishevelled hair, her tear-stained eyes, he got up quickly, went to her, then led her back and put her into his own chair. He sat on the arm of it, holding her head against his chest.

"What is it, my baby?" he asked gently.

"Mark doesn't love me."

"But why? Why?" He couldn't understand.

"He still loves Sally Viston."

"But Sally is . . . gone." He almost told her that Sally was dead.

"That makes no difference, daddy. He hasn't forgotten her."

"But he'll forget her eventually. He's bound to."

"No, I have a feeling he'll never forget her."

"Well then, if Mark is making you unhappy, and can never do anything else, then we must tell him to leave."

She broke out of his embrace, and looked up with a kind of terror. "Daddy, how can you suggest such a thing?" she asked incredulously.

He gazed pityingly down at her. Misery, long experience with misery, was in her eyes, in every line of her face. She was almost not even pretty any more.

"He's making you unhappy," he said.

"But I could never give him up, daddy. Never."

"You want to hold on to him? You want to stay unhappy? Why, baby?"

"I love him. Whether or not he loves me, I love him."

He couldn't understand this either. He tried, but he couldn't. "What will be the end of such a life for you, my darling?" he asked. "How long can you bear to go on being so unhappy?"

"I don't know, daddy."

"You'll be driven out of your mind . . . or something else equally horrible will happen . . ." He let go of her, got up and paced the room in a frenzy. "Paula, you must listen to me. You must listen to the advice of someone older and wiser than you. Your predicament will grow worse as time goes on. The sooner you separate yourself from Mark the better off you'll be."

She buried her face in her hands as she knelt there. He could barely hear her muffled words. "Daddy, when I married him I said, 'Till Death do us part.' I meant it . . ."

The stranger sat in the same chair that he had sat in the year before. He listened quietly and respectfully while Julian Krebs outlined his requirements.

"Mark Banning's death must be so arranged as to appear like an accident. Not a gory one. Not a painful death either. Rather the kind of accident wherein the victim dies instantaneously. That makes for a minimum amount of pity and regret among the survivors, don't you think?"

The stranger seemed noncommittal this evening, almost morose.

"It's entirely your choice, Mr. Krebs," he said.

"Well, it's my opinion that Paula will, of course, mourn for a time—be very unhappy in the process. But she can hardly be any more unhappy than she is now. But once Mark Banning is dead, and thus completely unattainable, she'll gradually come around, I believe. It's her position of being so near to, and yet so far from happiness that is destroying her. Sometimes one needs to cut right through to the core of a problem, instead of trying to nibble around its edges."

"So you want me now to dispose of your son-in-law."

"Yes, and I'll pay you the usual price. I'm used to paying for whatever I get." He passed another of those thick envelopes across to his visitor, and the latter accepted it. "I presume you can arrange the matter precisely as I have prescribed."

"Oh yes, I can do that."

Julian tried to penetrate the thin man's stolid expression, but failed. "I have a feeling that you're secretly laughing at me," he said.

"You're wrong," the stranger said. "I haven't much of a sense of humor."

"You're not thinking to yourself that I'm a foolish old man? That now I have to pay for another killing to undo the mistake of the first? Well, my friend, I don't see it that

way at all. If Mark had married Sally Viston, my daughter would be just as desperately unhappy as she is now. So I consider both of these jobs of yours were necessary."

The stranger rose stiffly from his chair. "I'm glad you suffer from no remorse, Mr. Krebs. Perhaps I agree with you in part. Granted the state of things, the fates as they are, once you decreed the death of Sally Viston, then the death of Mark Banning became necessary and inevitable. But the management of all this is yours, Mr. Krebs. I only do what I am told."

They confronted each other for a long moment. As before, Julian felt enormously uncomfortable in the presence of this man, being looked at by him without really being able to look back. And despite the roaring fire, there was a chill in the room, as if the stranger had the ability somehow to bring the outside weather in with him. Well anyway, their business had been concluded now. And it had been done more quickly, more efficiently this time, as if they knew each other better.

"Well, good night, sir," Julian said.

The stranger bowed and departed.

He stared at Paula, sitting on the floor before the fire, fascinated for the moment by the flames. Because it had such fascination for her, and thus kept her quiet and appeased, he kept it going even in this warm late spring.

"Where is Mark now?" she asked suddenly.

He hesitated before answering. Of all the things she did, these questions of hers—especially this kind of question—disturbed him the most.

"Where is Mark now?" she repeated in a more demanding tone.

He was forced to answer. "I think he's just gone out for a walk," he said quickly. "He'll be back soon."

She pouted like a child, thrusting out her lower lip and frowning. "Why doesn't he ever take me with him?" she wanted to know.

"Because of the nasty weather, my darling." The sun was shining brightly, of course, but the drapes were drawn across the windows. "So it's much nicer for you to stay in here by the warm fire. You like the fire, don't you?"

She nodded, smiling suddenly. "Oh yes, I like the fire."

"Then sit and look at the fire, my darling. Look at the lovely fire."

She brought her knees up under her chin, wrapped her arms around her shins, and rocked contentedly for a little while. But despite her placidity, he continued to watch her carefully, alert for the change that would certainly come again. For the moment, she seemed happy. But he did not trust that always-present, always-ominous glimmer-

ing in her eyes, where the reflection of the flames now danced.

"Where is Mark?" She asked it again, quietly.

"Taking a walk. He'll be back soon."

"You're lying to me, daddy. I know you are."

The accusation startled him. Her periods of seeming lucidity, of seeming deep perception, always startled him when they began. "I'm not lying," he began lamely.

"Oh yes, you are, daddy. Mark isn't out for a walk. Mark is dead."

His greatest fight at times like these was to control himself, to prevent any outburst of his own emotion that might affect her. "Paula, whatever gave you that idea?" he asked.

She stopped her rocking motion, and swiveled on the floor to face him. "I saw him buried," she said. "I remember now. I saw his casket lowered into the ground."

"You remember no such thing. You're imagining . . ."

"Daddy, why do you lie to me?"

"I'm not . . ."

"Mark is dead because he wanted to die. He didn't love me."

"Of course he loved you. I mean . . . of course he loves you . . . he loves you now . . ."

"No, he loved me once. A long time ago. I can't remember how, but I know he did. Then there was a girl. Her name was Sally. He stopped loving me, and started loving her. He still loves her."

"No, Paula! How can he love her . . . ?" He stopped, appalled at what he'd come so close to saying, that Mark couldn't love anybody because he was dead.

But Paula had jumped to her feet now, her eyes brilliantly aflame and looking straight at Julian. "I know how he can love her. He's dead, gone to another world. And Sally's in that other world, because she's dead too . . ."

"No, Paula!"

But she wasn't listening to him. She'd begun to pace on the rug. "I know Sally must be dead. I never believed that she left Mark for some other man. That's impossible, because Mark was the most wonderful man in the whole world. No woman would ever leave him. So she must be dead . . ."

She stopped then and looked at her father again, her face distorted with horror. "They're together again now. Mark and Sally. Both dead, and together again in another world. She's in his arms right now!"

What could he say? What could he tell her that in her strange awareness of the real truth she could possibly believe? He tried to think, and he could not think. Both his mind and body seemed paralyzed.

Then, standing there in front of him, clenching her fists and closing her eyes, she uttered a shriek. "Help me, daddy! Help me find Mark! Please!"

She swayed for a moment, rip-

ples of agony passing up and down her face and body. When she opened her eyes finally, they were clear no longer, but wild and red-rimmed. With a sudden, swift movement she turned. Two steps took her to the fireplace. Before Julian could even guess what she was about to do, she threw herself into it.

He acted then finally, with the demonic energy of madness. He pulled her out, despite her struggles to prevent him. He pulled her out, kicking and screaming, oblivious to the fire's touch on his own flesh. He beat out the flames on Paula's burning clothes with his bare hands, and when that was not enough, he used his jacket. He succeeded in the end, and he lay beside her on the floor, his strength spent.

Hers must have been too. She was not badly burned, but she did not try to move. She only moaned, and he could hear her mumbled words.

"Help me, daddy . . ."

"Are you quite sure this is the way you want it?" the stranger asked.

"I am quite sure," Julian answered.

"But you have told me there have been no more suicide attempts. She hasn't even tried to injure herself lately."

Julian shook his head stubbornly. "But she is suffering inside. I can't even estimate how much she is suffering."

"There are institutions, Mr. Krebs . . . doctors . . . specialists in disorders of the mind. Shouldn't you try them at least?"

"They couldn't give her the love she wants . . . any more than I can. And how she would suffer while they were trying. No, I can't allow that. I told you what I wanted. I am paying for it. Why can't I get what I want?"

"You can have anything, Mr. Krebs, if you are willing to pay."

"Then no more advice please," Julian said.

"Do you have any suggestions as to how or when?"

"Mercifully and quickly . . . that is all I care about. Today . . . right now."

Julian Krebs stood looking out of the big front window. He could see the moon, cold and white through the bare branches of the trees, bathing the dead earth with a ghostly, motionless light. Gazing at that earth, he thought of Paula.

Thinking of her made him shiver. It was cold in the library. Instinctively, as of old, he walked to the fireplace. But he stopped when he got there, did not bend down toward the neat pile of logs someone else—a servant—had placed there. No, he could not light a fire. He could never light this fire again. He would have to endure the cold.

He strode back in the gloom—the library had always been a gloomy place without a fire—toward the window. The outer darkness entranced him. He had grown into the habit of staring out at the ground, the soil of the earth. He had watched it bloom and flower with life, had smelled the fragrance of that life that penetrated even into here, then had watched it all decay again, get sleepy, wither, die.

In the ground, of course, there were seeds of other life. Spring would come again. But in him there were no such seeds, no hope. When a human being goes back to the earth, it was not to sleep, he reflected. The earth was the final end. And Paula—all that remained of himself too—was in the earth.

Time was running out. Almost gone. Time . . . why didn't the Leipzig clock strike the hour, he wondered suddenly. Then he knew. He hadn't wound the clock for months. It was a dead thing too.

Paula . . .

But he was hearing something. A faint sound, like the opening of the front door. He was about to shout to one of the servants. Who is opening the front door? Who is letting the cold in? But he didn't shout. Because he didn't care. The cold was entering by itself. It was already master of the house. It was inside his own body, clutching at his heart.

He turned to look, however, when the library door opened. And somehow he was not surprised when he saw the stranger there on the threshold. No longer a stranger really. A friend. No, not a friend either. Never a friend. But a familiar, oh too familiar acquaintance.

The stranger, muffled in his black garb, was almost invisible in the semi-darkness. But his identity was unmistakable, for as always, a clammy cold accompanied him.

"I hope you'll pardon my intrusion," the visitor said. "I realize you haven't asked me to come. But the seasons have changed again, and I was wondering."

"You were wondering . . . ?"

"If you had a job for me. If there was anyone . . . anything . . . that had been overlooked."

Julian felt tired. He did not have to think very long. "Yes, I have a job for you," he said.

# OBITUARY

*If you have been looking for an honest man, lately, here is one. It just so happens that he is also dead, and I'm sorry to say I have no live honest men on hand — at the moment — which I might offer you. I will say this honest man's death was most puzzling and I'm sure all of you will enjoy it.*

**A NOVELETTE**
**by Helen Nielsen**

*Funeral arrangements are being made today for Arvid Axelrod, 59, who succumbed to a heart attack last night. Axelrod, a native of Iowa, had been a resident of this area for the past 28 years. A member of the state board of realtors, he was also active in the West Hollywood Chamber of Commerce, the Masonic Lodge, and various service organizations. He is survived by a sister, Amelia, with whom he had shared his home at 1047 N. Grovewood Avenue since the death of his wife in 1949. Services will be held in the Hollywood Cemetery Chapel on Saturday at 3* P.M.

IT HAD STARTED to rain shortly before dusk, a slow drizzle that developed into a steady downpour as the night wore on. It was a quiet Thursday at the West Hollywood Sheriff's Station—the night before payday for most of the working class and wet enough to keep the leisure class at home. It was a very fine night, however, for traffic accidents; but at 2.07 A.M., by the wall clock behind Deputy George Gutzman's head, desk duty had ebbed into the long, dull wait for dawn, and Gutzman, ensconced in his chair behind the counter-high desk, had time to open the thermos of coffee and the box of apple kuchen he brought to work with him each night.

"Lundigan—"

Deputy Lundigan pulled his face out of the files and proceeded to the desk. He was a younger man than Gutzman and slimmer at the hips and waist, a condition liable to change if he were exposed to many more coffee breaks over Mrs. Gutzman's kuchen. While Gutzman poured the coffee, Lundigan's hand idly opened the evening paper that had remained folded on the desk.

"What's new?" Gutzman asked.

"The usual," Lundigan said. "The Russians are threatening to exterminate everybody who doesn't want peace, some guy in Van Nuys shot his wife, and another big wheel in the government is being accused of taking bribes. Honestly, Gutzman, sometimes I think we're suckers."

The kuchen was cut—crumbly, the way Gutzman liked it. He laid down the knife and licked his fingers.

"Suckers?" he repeated.

"There's cream in this world—lots of it. I like cream."

Gutzman shoved a small container toward him.

"Help yourself," he said.

"I don't mean that! You know what I mean!"

"Sure," Gutzman said, "—San Quentin."

"What?"

"They put cops there, too, es-

pecially if they're caught doing the sort of thing you're thinking."

"Now, wait a minute—"

The kid, which was the way Gutzman thought of new recruits, was a little red about the ears. Gutzman knew what he was going through. It was the first few years in uniform that were the toughest—all the easy money that could be had by looking the other way at the right time, and the retirement pay so far away it didn't seem important. At forty-four the retirement pay looked a lot bigger. Lundigan was a good kid; he'd learn. Gutzman grinned at him.

"Sugar?" he asked.

"Might as well sweeten my coffee," Lundigan growled, "it's the only kind of sugar I'm going to get. You know, if I could be sure there was even one honest citizen out there in that jungle—"

It was a black jungle, dripping black and just outside the transparent curtain of the wide plate glass doors; and then, just as Lundigan turned his head, a pair of headlights cut a bright path through the black, swung out of sight again, and were followed by the distinct sound of fenders crunching against the wall of the parking area.

"Sounds like we've got company," Gutzman observed, rising from his chair. "Now, I wonder—"

Nobody recognized Arvid Axelrod when he came in to make his confession; there was no reason why anyone should. He wasn't wanted for anything. He'd never so much as had his photograph printed, except once in the class book of a small business college in Cedar Rapids, and once in a trade magazine for California realtors. He couldn't have been recognized from those photos anyway. The reason for that was more than the changes wrought by the passing years; it was the visible ravage of shock. His skin had acquired a sickly gray cast; his pale blue eyes were glazed; his necktie was askew, and the sparse gray hair on his head was matted with rain. Having stumbled through the door, he paused long enough to take stock of his surroundings and then continued, half-walking, half-falling until his slight body collided with the counter, which separated him from Deputy Gutzman. There he hung, his hands gripping the top of the desk as if he were a seasick voyager who'd reached the rail just in time.

*Drunk,* Gutzman thought, setting his coffee cup back on the desk. He leaned across the counter, expecting to be met by the aromatic spirits of whatever ailed the newcomer; but, instead, he was aware only of a heavy rasping sound that prompted a swift change of mind.

"Lundigan—give a look. I think we've got a hit and run victim."

A low gate separated the office area from the small foyer. Lundigan reached the other side of it fast.

"I don't see any bruises," he reported. "I don't see any blood."

"Blood—"

One word, more gasped than enunciated, but it seemed to take all of the old man's strength to get it out.

"Easy, Pop," Lundigan said, "don't get excited. What about the blood. Was there an accident?"

"I think he's going to faint," Gutzman interrupted. "Wait a minute. I'll come around and give you a hand."

There was a plain wooden bench back against the wall across the foyer. The logical thing was to get the old man to it, so he could sit down before he fell down; but the man was in no state to be logical. At Gutzman's approach, he pulled away. He still clung to the top of the counter with one hand; but the other, the left, was now drawn up against his chest in a contorted position with the fingers clenched white. There was pain in his eyes, but there was more than pain. There was a glint of determination that commanded respect.

"I have to tell," he protested.

"Tell?" Gutzman echoed. "Tell what?"

"The blood . . . She's dead."

"Who's dead, Pop?" Lundigan prodded. "Who?"

Axelrod tried to focus his eyes on Lundigan's face, but he couldn't seem to find it. Into space he answered:

"The woman."

"What woman? Where is she?"

"Leave him alone," Gutzman ordered. "He's sick. Take it easy, Mister. I'll get a glass of water—"

The water cooler was a few steps away. Gutzman filled a paper cup and turned back toward the counter, but by this time Axelrod had noticed the bench on the wall behind him and backed into it. He dropped down slowly into a sagging position and then stared about wildly as if trying to determine where he was. For an instant his eyes found the rain spattered doors.

"The other door—" he said.

Gutzman knelt beside him.

"Here, take a drink of this," he urged. "You can tell us all about it later."

The sound of his voice seemed to give Axelrod a fix on his whereabouts. His head turned back from the door and, for the first time, his eyes met Gutzman's in a liaison that brought a surge of strength to his body. He pulled himself upright, bringing his face closer to Gutzman's.

"Officer," he began, and there was relief in his voice as if he only now realized he'd reached a destination, "I've come to make a confession . . . The woman is dead . . . I killed her."

The words had come slowly, each one forced out by some last reserve of strength; but the relief at having spoken them was so great that he was almost smiling as he fell back

against the bench. Gutzman stared at his face for a few seconds and then set the cup of water down on the floor. The man on the bench didn't need it. He was dead.

*He is survived by a sister, Amelia, with whom he had shared his home at 1047 N. Grovewood Avenue . . .*

Police officers have various duties, among which is the investigation of murder; but such an investigation is extremely hampered by the absence of either the victim or knowledge of the scene of the crime. The house on Grovewood Avenue didn't look sinister at all. It was a modest frame bungalow with twin rows of rose trees lining the walk up to the front porch. Somebody had taken great pride in those rose trees. They stood now in pools of water left by the rain that had recently ceased; but even in the fringe of light cast by the street lamp in the parkway, the excellence of their blooms was discernible. Inside the house, a slightly built, gray-haired woman, red-eyed from weeping, tugged at the belt of her faded flannel robe and tried to make sense of the inquiry being put to her. With her was an elderly man in a raincoat, tall, square-shouldered, with alert eyes moving from the faces of the two inquiring police officers to the face of Amelia Axelrod. His name was Felix Kleinschmidt, M.D., personal physician to Arvid Axelrod, whose body he'd just identified at the morgue. Cause of death: coronary thrombosis.

"Mr. Axelrod had been under my care for several years," he explained. "As I told your medical examiner, Lieutenant, he'd suffered a fairly severe heart attack some months ago, which was why you found the prescription carrying my name among the identification papers in his wallet. It's a tragedy, of course, but it could have happened at any time. You knew that, Amelia."

The latter words were spoken in a softer voice and directed to the woman in the robe.

"As for that fantastic confession he made before he died," Kleinschmidt added, "I'm at a loss as how to explain it."

"It's unbelieveable," Amelia Axelrod said in a hollow voice. "I can't imagine Arvid even thinking of murder. And a woman! What woman?"

The two officers were Lieutenant Harris of Homicide, who'd taken over from downtown, and Deputy Gutzman, who'd been relieved of desk duty in order to relate the details of Axelrod's death to his bewildered sister. She hadn't been to the morgue with Dr. Kleinschmidt; in fact, there had been no answer when a telephone call was made to Axelrod's home. The doctor had explained that Miss Axelrod often took a sleeping pill at bedtime; in any event, it was better

not to get her out in the middle of the night. But the news of death can't really be broken gently, and Gutzman's story had sounded strange and unreal as he told it again in the non-violent atmosphere of a modest living room.

Lieutenant Harris, trained to listen for slips of the lip, caught Amelia's last words.

"Why not a woman, Miss Axelrod?" he asked. "Didn't your brother have any women friends?"

"Arvid?"

The thought seemed as fantastic as the story of Axelrod's strange confession. The reaction was written all over her face.

"He wasn't such an old man," Harris suggested. "Only fifty-nine."

"But there was no woman," she protested. "Dr. Kleinschmidt, can't you explain to these men—"

Harris' line of questioning changed. Prosaic facts were a deterrent to hysteria, and facts were needed. Axelrod was a realtor. His office was in a small building on Santa Monica Boulevard — hours 9:00 to 5:00. ". . . unless he had a late appointment with a client," Amelia added. "I suppose that's what happened tonight—" She paused and glanced at the windows where darkness was beginning to fade into dawn. "—last night," she corrected.

Harris was interested.

"Then your brother did have an appointment last night."

"I said that he must have had an appointment," she answered. "All I know is that he told me at dinner that he would have to go back to the office at nine o'clock. I tried to talk him out of it. He'd just gotten over a bad cold and it was raining so hard, but Arvid was very set in his ways. If he said he'd do a thing, he did it."

"When did your brother leave?"

"When? About a quarter of nine, I think. Yes. I went to bed right afterwards and sat up reading, thinking I'd hear him when he came in. I wanted to remind him to get right out of his wet things, and not to forget the glass of milk I'd left on his bedside table. Arvid didn't like milk. He always had to be reminded. But I didn't hear him. I must have dozed over my book, because I didn't hear anything until I awakened at his pacing in his room."

"Pacing?"

Gutzman and Harris pounced on the word simultaneously. So Axelrod had returned to the house after his appointment.

"At what time was that, Miss Axelrod?" Harris asked.

"It was 11:55, exactly," she replied. "I looked at my clock and decided not to go to Arvid's room because it was so late; but once I'm awake, it's difficult for me to go back to sleep. I took two sleeping pills—that's why I didn't hear the telephone when you rang."

"But the pacing," Harris protested. "Weren't you curious?"

"Curious, Lieutenant? Oh, no. I'm used to it. Arvid's had nervous spells ever since Esther, that was his wife, passed away nine years ago. They were very close. That's why I know there couldn't have been a woman. This is ridiculous! Just ridiculous!"

It wasn't only ridiculous; it was impossible. From what had been learned of Arvid Axelrod in the few hours since his death, he certainly seemed the least likely sort of citizen to murder anyone. There was no indication that he led a double life; it would have taken a special kind of genius to do that under sister Amelia's motherly eyes. An examination of Axelrod's bedroom added nothing to the mystery except the corroboration of her story to the extent of one untouched glass of milk on the bedside table and a bed that hadn't been slept in.

While Harris continued the questioning, Gutzman moved about the room. A man always left something of himself in his room after he died: the old fashioned walnut headboard and chest, a kneehole desk under the window that looked more as if it had belonged to a woman than a man. The top of the desk was clean, except for a photograph in a silver frame—a woman, plump in her middle-age, but with a good-natured beauty that must have made her the belle of the ball about the time Axelrod was getting the diploma that was framed and hanging on the wall.

"And you didn't hear your brother leave the house a second time, I suppose," Harris was saying to the sister.

"I couldn't," she answered. "I'd taken the sleeping pills. Dr. Kleinschmidt will tell you. He gave me the pills."

It was a diploma from a small college in Iowa, class of 1922. Just below it was a narrow bookcase. The books in it were old and worn: a realtor's manual, real estate law, a set of Mark Twain, a leather bound volume of the poems of Robert Service . . .

"This is a terrible experience for Amelia," Dr. Kleinschmidt said. "I hope none of that wild confession gets into the newspapers. Arvid Axelrod was a fine man—ask anyone in the community. His reputation is spotless. It should be protected."

Gutzman turned away from the bookcase. Amelia Axelrod had left the room. Dr. Kleinschmidt lingered, his eyes watching Gutzman in particular.

"I've only reported what Axelrod told me," Gutzman said, "and that only to the Lieutenant, here, and to you and Miss Axelrod."

Kleinschmidt looked relieved, "Good," he said. "You know, I've been thinking this thing over. At first I was too shocked to make any sense out of it; but now, after hearing Amelia's story, I think I can understand what must have hap-

pened here last night. Mr. Axelrod was under my care—bear that in mind. No liquor, no smoking, no over-exertion. What's more, as Amelia told us, he'd been suffering from a cold. In spite of that, he went out on an appointment last night. Driving to and from the office would have been a strain in that downpour; then, too, something might have gone wrong, some minor irritation that disturbed him enough that he couldn't relax when he returned home."

"It wasn't a minor irritation that brought him to my desk last night," Gutzman protested.

"No, Officer, I'm sure it wasn't," Kleinschmidt agreed. "Mr. Axelrod paced the floor. He wasn't well, he couldn't relax — that might well have caused another heart attack."

"Here in the house, you mean," Harris said.

"Yes, here in the house. It might have been slight. He would have called out to Amelia, but she was under sedation and couldn't hear. In panic, he would have gone for help—"

"Why wouldn't he have telephoned, Doctor?" Gutzman asked.

The question stopped Kleinschmidt only momentarily.

"He probably did, at that. I was at a physician's conference last night and didn't get home until a couple of hours before you called me. Mr. Axelrod might have telephoned. Getting no answer, he would have driven off to find help anywhere. The Sheriff's station isn't far, and he'd surely have seen the lights. A light in the darkness. Wouldn't a dying man stop? Wouldn't he go inside?"

"To confess a murder?"

Kleinschmidt's face clouded. He'd built up a plausible story so far, but this story had an implausible ending.

"That much is out of character," he admitted. "But how much can we ever really know of one another? Do you suppose there's anyone on this earth who hasn't at least thought of murder? Realizing that somehow and for some reason he was in a police station, Axelrod's befuddled mind might have imagined the wish fulfilled. Confession is a natural desire to the dying."

"Then you write off Mr. Axelrod's statement as pure fantasy," Gutzman said.

Dr. Kleinschmidt's eyes left no doubt of his opinion.

"Have you found the murdered woman?" he asked.

They had not found a murdered woman. It was almost eerie. Somewhere in the city at least one woman should have died violently during the night—the law of averages indicated that. But as yet, except for the traffic fatalities, none of which could have involved Axelrod, the morgue was strangely empty.

And yet, Axelrod was there. Gutzman wasn't likely to forget that. Only he could know what that

confession had meant to the dying man—the effort it had taken and the relief it had given. It was the relief he remembered most vividly. More than hallucination was behind that. Unless Axelrod had an actual murder buried in his past— Gutzman glanced at the woman's face smiling at him from the frame on the desk and was ashamed at the thought. Aloud, he said:

"I can't believe the man who died practically in my arms last night ever *wanted* to kill anyone."

"Then what do you suggest?" Lieutenant Harris said.

The lieutenant was putting it in his lap. Without his story, they'd have nothing on their hands but a simple case of death from natural causes. At least, until the blood-stained body of a woman turned up and required them to find her killer. But there was one point that could stand clarification.

"Why," Gutzman asked, "do you suppose it was so important for anybody to see a realtor in last night's downpour?"

*Axelrod, a native of Iowa, had been a resident of this area for the past 28 years. A member of the state board of realtors. . . .*

It was a small frame building on Santa Monica Boulevard, one of the few remaining evidences of a day when housing developments were barley fields and the realtors's miniature bungalow was a landmark on a country road. Inside, the bungalow had been partitioned into two sections with a tiny reception room occupying the front corner. Straight ahead, as Gutzman and Harris entered, was a door with the name, Arvid Axelrod, lettered in chipped black paint. To the right of them was a second door, and on it the words: Parker and Stanton, Property Management, in bright gold leaf. Axelrod's office was locked, but Lieutenant Harris had the key that had been taken from the dead man's personal effects. While he worked on the lock, the second door opened and a curious observer stepped out into the reception room.

He was of stocky build, well-dressed, looking about forty-five but was probably older. The widow's peak that rose up into a deep wave above his forehead was a shade too perfect to be real, and his athletic suntan was probably the product of an electric appliance. But there was nothing artificial in his reaction when curiosity earned him the news of Axelrod's death.

"No, it isn't possible!" he said. "Not Axelrod! Why, only last night—"

Harris had the door to the office unlocked. He removed the key and shoved the door open so Gutzman could go in and look around. His own attention was still fixed on the man at the second door. His eyes flicked over the lettering.

"Parker or Stanton?" he asked.

"Parker," the man said. "C. Evans

Parker—" He started to withdraw a card from behind the handkerchief in his breast pocket and then changed his mind. The fact that he was in the presence of police officers, one uniformed and one too obvious to be mistaken for anything else, seemed suddenly to impress him.

"What — how did he die?" he asked.

Harris ignored the question.

"So you saw Mr. Axelrod last night," he observed. "When was that, Mr. Parker?"

"When?" Parker edged closer to the open door, his eyes following Gutzman's movements inside the office. It was a small room containing an old flat-topped desk, a filing cabinet, two chairs, a water cooler . . . "Oh, you mean the time," Parker added. "Just before 5 when we were leaving. He seemed all right then except for the cold he'd been fighting. He said he was going home a little early and get right to bed, but then the telephone rang." . . . a thick book of multiple listings, a Notary Public's seal, a small steel safe—locked. Parker continued to watch Gutzman. Harris continued to question Parker.

"Mr. Axelrod's telephone?"

"Yes, the telephone in his office. We were here in the hall talking—he was just about to lock up, and then the telephone rang. It was some client, I think. He must have been tied up in an accident because I heard Axelrod say something about being sorry and he hoped nobody was hurt. Is that what happened to Axelrod?"

An ashtray on the desk contained three cigarette stubs, standard brand, no lipstick on the mouthpiece. Everything else about the desk looked neat, as if it had been cleaned up for the night. Even the waste basket was empty except for a wadded piece of cardboard.

"About that telephone call," Harris asked, still ignoring Parker's queries. "Did Mr. Axelrod mention who the client was?"

Parker was beginning to be a very puzzled man.

"No," he said. "Mr. Axelrod and I never discussed our clients. My partner and I have only been in this office a few months."

"Your partner—" Harris glanced back at the lettering on the door behind Parker's shoulder.

"Yes. Mr. Stanton."

"Maybe Axelrod told him something about that call."

"No, he couldn't. Mr. Stanton is in Mexico on business."

Gutzman bent down and retrieved the wadded cardboard. It was a discarded match folder, bearing an advertising blurb from some night spot called The Sirocco Cabaret.

"And then, after taking the call," Harris continued, "Mr. Axelrod left the office, I suppose."

Parker's eyes were still on Gutzman.

"Yes, he did," he answered.

"And he didn't come back later?"

"Later? I don't know about that. I wasn't here later. I went out with Axelrod. We locked up together."

"But didn't he say anything about a later appointment?"

Parker hesitated. Between the questions and the search of the dead man's office, he was developing a suspicious nature.

"I don't think so," he answered. "I don't remember."

"But if he had made a later appointment," Harris urged, "say, for nine o'clock last night, do you think he would have kept it?"

"Axelrod?" Parker seemed surprised at the question. "Of course he would have kept it. Axelrod was as good as his word—ask anyone around here. He'd been in business for nearly thirty years. A man has to be accommodating to last like that." And then Parker reflected on what he'd been asked and added: "Nine o'clock last night. Did he go out at that hour? It was pouring."

"Were you out then, Mr. Parker?"

"I'll say I wasn't! I was watching television—my favorite show, 'Law of the Range.' But I heard the rain on the windows. Say, that's probably what got him—the rain and his cold."

There was no comment on Parker's *post mortem*. Gutzman concluded his study of the match folder and slipped it into his pocket. He turned about to continue his examination of the office, and then his eyes found and held a thing on the far wall that had previously gone unnoticed.

"Mr. Parker," he said suddenly, "where does that door lead?"

Parker was too puzzled by this time to protest any question.

"To my office," he answered.

"Is it locked?"

"Yes, it is."

Gutzman stepped forward and tried the knob. It didn't turn.

"Locked from your side?" he asked.

"Yes, I usually keep it that way."

"Usually? Was it locked last night when you left the building?"

"If it's locked now, it was locked then," Parker said. "Look, officers, if there's anything questionable about Mr. Axelrod's death, maybe I can help you."

"Questionable?" Harris repeated. "Why should there be anything questionable about it?"

Why indeed. Lieutenant Harris and Deputy Gutzman's eyes met. The office was just as any office should be on any morning of any day. It was a few minutes past nine AM, exactly twelve hours after the time Axelrod had supposedly returned for his mysterious appointment, and nothing to show for that appointment except a few cigarette stubs and a crumpled match folder that might have been left by any client at any time of the previous day. Nothing was out

of order; nothing seemed to be missing, and the asphalt tile floor was completely devoid of any trace of the blood the dying man had mentioned.

Parker groped for words.

"I don't know," he said, at last. "I just wondered. I mean, usually when the police— But, no. Not Mr. Axelrod. Not a man of his reputation."

"What about his reputation?" Harris asked.

"It was so fine. Mr. Axelrod couldn't have been mixed up in anything illegitimate. Not Mr. Axelrod."

The lieutenant stared at Mr. Parker for several seconds and then looked at Gutzman.

"All finished?" he asked. "Everything in order?"

"All finished," Gutzman ananswered.

"Good. We can lock up again. And don't worry about anything, Mr. Parker. Mr. Axelrod's sister is a nervous woman. She just wanted to know everything was secure."

It wasn't a nice thing to put blame on a lady, but it was a way to leave the curious Mr. Parker without telling any secrets. Until the dying confession could be corroborated by a corpse, it wasn't for publication.

Outside the building, Gutzman handed the match folder to the lieutenant with one cryptic comment concerning the source.

"Not Mr. Axelrod," he said.

*. . . he was also active in the West Hollywood Chamber of Commerce, the Masonic Lodge, and various service organizations.*

The other door. Lieutenant Harris hadn't missed the signficance of Gutzman's inquiry about the locked door between the two offices. A dying man's words were hard to forget. As for the match folder, it had, as Gutzman intimated, come from a night spot not usually frequented by sober, middle-aged citizens.

"Not that we can ever be sure about that," Harris mused. "These old gents sometimes have ideas even their psychiatrists can't guess."

"Axelrod didn't smoke," Gutzman reminded. "Doctor's orders."

"That's right, he didn't. Okay, Gutzman, the cabaret is in your territory. You can follow that lead. I'll go along to the extent of running a check on Parker and Stanton to see what kind of property they manage. If we're going to investigate a murder that doesn't seem to have happened, we might as well be thorough."

It was a lead slim enough to make the proverbial needle in the haystack seem as obvious as a neon sign, but there was a reason why Gutzman found a discarded match folder so interesting. The Sirocco Cabaret had an unsavory reputation. For some months it had been dormant, but it was still on the vice and narcotics list of places not to miss when trouble came up. Arvid

Axelrod was trouble of a different kind, but he was still trouble.

From the outside, the place didn't look prosperous at all. A previously elaborate girly and bongo show had dwindled to a one arm piano player accompanying what, in the more expensive circuits, would have been called a chanteuse. Her name was Jenny Carr and she was very pretty, very young, and, most likely, very ambitious. Judging from her photograph displayed on the front of the building, she seemed a nice kid. Nice kids didn't sing in dives like the Sirocco Cabaret unless they were anxious to get started.

Inside, Gutzman found the bartender taking inventory. The bar was open from 11 AM, but the cabaret section would be dark until the night trade began. Gutzman was still in uniform. Changing into plain clothes would have been a waste of time, in company that could sense the law the way a barometer sensed a hurricane. He slid onto one of the barstools and asked for a cup of the strong black coffee from the glass pot brewing on a hot plate. He received no argument, only silent service that included having the spilled surplus gravely sopped up from the saucer with a paper napkin. The silence wasn't broken until he posed the direct question as to whether or not any recent customer, perhaps under the influence of too many uncapped bottles, had mentioned the name of Arvid Axelrod.

The bartender stared at him, his face completely devoid of expression.

"Who's he?" he challenged. "A new wrestler?" He glanced at the dark television set above the bar. "Just got this thing back from the repair shop yesterday. Never heard of him."

Words weren't important in a place like this; it was the way they were spoken. Gutzman watched the man's face, knowing how and where to look for the tell-tale break; but there was none. Behind them, the piano player was picking out a five finger improvisation for his own benefit in a dark and empty room. Was he worth questioning? While Gutzman drank his coffee and played with the idea, the front door opened and the living likeness of the display photos outside walked inside.

"You're late," the bartender growled. "Your ivory tickler has been bawling in his bicarbonate. He's written a new song just for you."

Jenny Carr tossed her head.

"I overslept," she said.

"Naturally," the bartender retorted. "After your night off, what else? Say, we caught you here on TV last night. You looked real mean holding that sixshooter."

"I am real mean," Jenny said. She reached across the counter and tweaked the bartender's rubbery chin; and then she became aware of Gutzman, his face half-buried be-

hind the coffee cup, and for a moment her eyebrows did juggling exercises over the significance of the presence of the law in the establishment at such an inactive hour.

She was as pretty as her picture, but they hadn't been introduced. Gutzman finished his coffee and set the cup down on the bar.

"If you can't help me," he said, coming to his feet, "I might as well get going. But keep the name in mind, will you? If you hear it mentioned, let me know."

"I'm not so good at names," the bartender said. "I think I've forgotten it already."

"Axelrod," Gutzman reminded, "—Arvid Axelrod."

And then the thing he'd watched for in the bartender's face happened to Jenny Carr's; an almost imperceptible reaction, as if a response had started and was immediately smothered. But the word on her lips couldn't be shut off in time.

"Axelrod?" she repeated.

"Know him?" Gutzman asked.

"No. No, I don't know him. It's just that he has such an unusual name."

"*Had* such an unusual name," Gutzman corrected. "He's dead. He died last night."

Jenny Carr stared at him. She had studied her dramatic lessons carefully, but they'd gone only skin deep. There was nothing to hide the sudden loss of color in her face, in the few seconds before she moved quickly past him into the dark room beyond. Even the most sympathetic nature never took a stranger's death so hard.

Gutzman went to headquarters downtown and found Lieutenant Harris. A woman's facial reaction wasn't much in the way of evidence, but it hadn't been imaginary.

"I know there's some connection between those two," he insisted. "Maybe our solid citizen was leading a double life. A girl like Jenny needs a sympathetic bankroll—"

"What bankroll?" Harris interrupted. "Axelrod's?"

"He owned a house, didn't he?"

"In joint tenancy with his sister. That's how it's recorded over in the Hall of Records."

"Well, he had a business and a business property."

"A business, yes. A modest one. The property belongs to Dr. Kleinschmidt. I called Miss Axelrod to ask if she knew of anyone her brother might have given a key to the office, and she told me he'd transferred ownership of the property to Kleinschmidt in payment of a debt after his wife died nine years ago. The doctor corroborated the statement. Says he didn't want to do business that way, but Axelrod insisted. He didn't like having debts hanging over him."

"Then Kleinschmidt has the keys."

"Yes, if that means anything. I talked to him about the 'other door.'

He has an explanation for that to fit in with his explanation for the confession. He says it could have a symbolic reference. Axelrod, he says, must have felt death approaching and for him, so lonely since the loss of his wife, it was an escape—an exit."

"Another door," Gutzman suggested.

"Exactly."

"I don't believe it," Gutzman said bluntly. "I think the doctor's been reading too many books. How does all that explain the 9 o'clock appointment and the way Jennie Carr turned pale when I mentioned that Axelrod was dead?"

"That's not all it doesn't explain," Harris added. "I told you I was going to look into the status of Parker and Stanton. They're an interesting team. 'Property Management' lettered on a door can mean anything from a legitimate enterprise to a tax write-off for somebody who's hurtled too many brackets. Parker and Stanton haven't done that—yet."

The lieutenant's pause seemed significant.

"Yes?" Gutzman echoed. "What do you mean?"

"That's just it. I don't know what I mean. We haven't had time to make a thorough check. All I know is that both men were sharing a $60 apartment in one of those old stucco courts on Sweetzer Avenue up until three months ago—the address they're still listed at in the telephone directory. The landlady says they were in the stock business then—selling on commission over the telephone. They were also pushing some desert real estate. Tried to sell her a piece, but she wouldn't bite. But she did buy a $200 share in some Mexican mining stock they handled."

"There's one born every minute," Gutzman remarked.

"And one dies every minute, too," Harris said. "Get this. Four months ago, Mrs. Casey—that's the landlady — bought the stock. Three months ago, due to non-payment of rent, Parker and Stanton moved. Two months ago they rented the other office in Axelrod's location and simultaneously moved into an expensive apartment on the Strip. Yesterday afternoon, at about 4 o'clock, Parker returned to Mrs. Casey's court, paid her the back rent they owed plus $250 for her mining stock. What do you make of that?"

The lieutenant waited for his words to penetrate.

"Pay dirt," Gutzman said.

"It looks that way, doesn't it?"

"Particularly with Stanton in Mexico."

"Stanton *was* in Mexico," Harris corrected. "I checked the airlines to learn when he left here. It was five days ago on a round trip ticket returning yesterday on the 1 o'clock flight, which was only half an hour late."

"Then he's here now."

"Right here," Harris said. "He was killed in a traffic accident on Airport Boulevard yesterday afternoon at 3. You know what happens when the streets get that first glaze after the rain starts."

"Killed—" Gutzman echoed.

"Instantly. He's downstairs in the morgue right now — exactly four drawers away from Axelrod."

*Services will be held in the Hollywood Cemetery Chapel on Saturday at 3* PM.

They had a body at last; not the right body, but an important one. Gutzman absorbed the information and waited for more. There was no more. Stanton was dead. Axelrod was dead. Coincidence? Even Dr. Kleinschmidt couldn't have come up with a theory to stretch that far.

"Parker didn't mention his partner's death this morning," Gutzman mused. "Peculiar, isn't it? He was interested enough in Axelrod's."

"It's possible that he didn't know about it," Harris said. "Stanton moved around a lot. His auto registration and driver's license had dead addresses. But he had a letter in his pocket from a Mrs. Stanton in Long Beach, who turned out to be an ex-wife. She and their son, a kid of about sixteen, I hear, came down and identified the body."

Sixteen. Gutzman's mind had been working like an adding machine ever since Harris mentioned Stanton's death. There had to be some connection between those two bodies in the morgue, and the only possibility he'd found was Jennie Carr. But the beauteous Jenny couldn't, by any stretch of the imagination, be the ex-Mrs. Stanton and mother of a sixteen year old boy. She wasn't but three or four years over sixteen herself.

"But there has to be a connection," he said aloud. "Look, if Stanton's plane got in at 1:30—even allowing for custom's inspection—he should have been farther along than Airport Boulevard by 3 o'clock."

"What do you mean?" Harris asked.

"Unless," Gutzman added, almost talking to himself, "he had to wait for someone to pick him up. If he was in Mexico for five days, does it seem likely that he'd leave his car at the airport all that time?"

"It's been done."

"But does it seem likely? Wouldn't he have been more apt to leave it with a friend?"

"Parker you mean."

"He did buy up Mrs. Casey's stock at 4 o'clock. We both agreed a few minutes ago that buying the landlady's stock indicated the Mexican mine must be a good thing. But how could Parker be so sure of that, unless he'd talked to his partner after his return from Mexico City? Have you read the report on that accident? Could it be that two people were in the car

when Stanton was killed?"

Harris looked interested. "Keep talking," he said. "Tell a good enough story, maybe I'll read the report."

"All right, I'll try. What I need is a reason why Parker might have set up that appointment with Axelrod last night. Do you remember what he told us about Axelrod's telephone call? Somebody had been tied up in an accident, he said. Later he asked if Axelrod had died in an accident. Accident. Don't you see? Accident was on his mind. Lieutenant, I'd be willing to gamble a month's pay that Axelrod didn't get a telephone call at all. I think Parker made that 9 o'clock appointment himself."

"But why?" Harris demanded.

"That's what stumps me. Not to buy real estate, certainly. Parker was only interested in buying stock. —*Stock.*"

And then, suddenly, it all seemed to come clear. Gutzman remembered one of the things he'd seen in Axelrod's office, and remembering one thing was like starting a chain reaction.

"But Parker was watching television at 9 last night," Harris reminded.

By this time Gutzman was almost smiling.

"I know." he said. "He was watching 'Law of the Range'—his favorite program. He can probably quote every line of the story. Lieutenant, play a hunch for me, will you? Call the station that puts on 'Law of the Range' and find out who was in the cast of last night's production."

It was Friday afternoon at 3 PM, exactly twenty-four hours after Stanton's death and exactly twenty-four hours before Axelrod's funeral, when Deputy Gutzman rang Jenny Carr's doorbell. Harris was with him. They had about a twenty second wait before the door opened, slowly, and Jenny peered out.

"Oh," she said, staring at Gutzman's uniform, "it's you."

"Yes, it's me," Gutzman said, "and I've brought Lieutenant Harris of Homicide. We want to ask a few questions."

"Homicide?"

The word frightened her. She backed away from the door, making no protest when they entered. She had a small apartment, modestly furnished, neat—except for several newspapers and a paper-bound manuscript spread out on the divan. The manuscript bore a title now familiar to Gutzman. He picked it up and thumbed through the pages while the lieutenant began the questioning.

"Your name is Jenny Carr?"

"Yes, sir. It is."

"And you work at the Sirocco Cabaret?"

"Yes."

"Tell me, Miss Carr, did you ever meet a man named Arvid Axelrod?"

Her glance sprang to Gutzman, who looked up in time to catch the message in her eyes. *He's dead,* she was thinking. Gutzman scowled at her and she turned back to Harris.

"I—I'm not sure," she said. "I told the other officer this morning that he had a peculiar name. Maybe I've met him. I meet a lot of people."

"At the cabaret."

"No. I mean, yes, of course, but at other places, too."

"Or you might have seen the name in print."

"I don't know. I haven't seen—"

She stopped abruptly.

"Seen what, Miss Carr?"

She glanced down at the divan. The newspapers had bold, black headlines concerning crimes and disaster. None of them mentioned Arvid Axelrod.

Harris was interested in the array.

"You seem to be an avid reader, Miss Carr."

"I was on television last night," she said. "I thought there might be reviews."

Reviews weren't carried on the front pages, but Harris didn't mention that.

"I know you were," he said. "You were on at 9 o'clock."

"Yes."

"In 'Law of the Range.' You gave a nice performance, Miss Carr."

"Oh, you caught the show?"

"At a special showing about an hour ago. There was one scene in which you were particularly convincing. Is that the script you have there, Gutzman? Can you find the scene?"

"I've got it," Gutzman said.

"Give it to Miss Carr and let her read it for us."

She didn't like the idea. Her hand trembled slightly as she took the manuscript. She might have protested if Harris's voice hadn't been so firm.

"Just read it, please. It won't be necessary to perform it."

And Jenny Carr read, her voice low and her eyes darting from the manuscript to Harris.

"Molly enters the Marshal's office and approaches his desk. When the Marshal looks up, surprised, she speaks:

MOLLY—What have you done with him-

MARSHAL — Who do you mean?

MOLLY — You know who I mean. My brother, Richard. You've killed him!

MARSHAL — (rising from chair) You're mistaken, ma'am. I don't think I know your brother.

MOLLY — You're lying! You testified against him at the trial. My brother is Pecos Dick, and because of you he's been sentenced to hang. But he won't hang because I'm here to save him. I'm going to set him free even if I have to shoot you!"

Jenny Carr stopped reading. "Go ahead," Harris said, "finish the rest of it." She looked at the script again.

"Molly," she continued, "draws a six shooter from her handbag and points it at the marshal. There is a scuffle for the gun during which it is discharged. Molly falls to the floor."

"Thank you, Miss Carr," Harris said. "Now, where were you at 9 o'clock last night?"

She seemed stunned.

"At 9? I told you. I was on telesion."

"Is that what Parker told you to say? Don't you realize by this time that we know the show was on film? Last night was your night off at the club. Where were you?"

"I don't remember."

"In Axelrod's office?"

"No—"

"Playing your death scene again? How did he react, Miss Carr? Was he surprised when you came through that other door from Parker's office and pushed a gun in his face? Did he try to take it from you, just the way the scene's written? Was he frightened when he thought he'd killed you?"

The girl backed away under Harris's verbal attack. When the back of her knees struck the divan, she sat down, and then all of the resistance seemed to ebb out of her. She dropped her head for a moment, and when she looked up there were tears in her eyes.

"I don't know anything!" she protested. "I didn't do anything wrong! What did he tell you?"

"Axelrod couldn't tell us anything. He's dead."

"No, I mean Mr. Parker. What did he tell you about me? I only did what he paid me to do. He said it was a gag, an initiation stunt for a friend of his who was joining some kind of lodge. He paid me $50 — see?" She grabbed up her purse from somewhere behind the newspapers and pulled out five ten dollar bills to wave in Harris's face. "$50, that's all. Do you think I'd have anything to do with murder for $50? Well, I wouldn't! Not for fifty times $50! I thought it was an initiation stunt, the way he told me. I didn't know anything about that stock until it was too late."

Harris glanced at Gutzman

"On the nose," he said. "What about the stock, Miss Carr? Was it Mr. Stanton's share of stock in the Mexican mine."

She was verging on hysteria, but she managed a reply.

"I don't know. It was some kind of stock. I heard Mr. Parker and another man — Mr. Axelrod, I learned later, quarreling about something while I was waiting for my cue in Mr. Parker's office. I heard Mr. Stanton's name. That's all I know. And then, afterward—after Mr. Axelrod thought he'd shot me and Mr. Parker had dragged my body off into his office—"

"Smeared with fake blood," Gutzman interposed.

"Yes, Mr. Parker wanted it realistic. I didn't know why until it was all over. After he'd taken me out of the office I heard him tell Mr. Axelrod that I was a psycho friend of his who always went around threatening to kill people and that I'd tried to commit suicide several times. He told Mr. Axelrod that if he would go ahead and notarize the stock transfer pre-dated to before Mr. Stanton's trip to Mexico City, he would get me out of the office and when the police found my body he'd tell them it was suicide. Otherwise, he said, Axelrod was finished, reputation or no reputation and his sister would probably die of the shock."

"So that's how he worked it," Gutzman said. "You see Axelrod wasn't lying. He really thought—"

The lieutenant's glare stopped him mid-sentence. He wasn't quite through with Jenny Carr.

"And you heard all of the conversation, Miss Carr?"

"Yes. I was in the other office. I didn't dare come out. I was supposed to be dead."

"And Mr. Axelrod notarized the stock transfer."

"I guess he did. I heard him say it wasn't honest and he didn't believe the signature was really Mr. Stanton's; but Mr. Parker said that wasn't important because nobody would question anything Mr. Axelrod put his name to. But I didn't know Parker killed him! It must have been after he took my body out to his car. He went back inside for something and he must have killed him then."

Harris relaxed. He looked at Gutzman and his eyes were saying that the trick had worked and all they needed to do now was pick up Parker and charge him with attempted fraud.

"Thank you, Miss Carr," he said. "I'm sure we can count on your testimony."

"But I don't know anything except what I've already told you," she protested. "I don't want to be mixed up in murder."

"Murder?"

Gutzman was glad they were leaving the apartment. Jenny Carr was apt to give way to a fit of temperament after Harris's parting words.

"Nobody was murdered," he said. "Mr. Axelrod died of a heart attack. You'll probably find the news of his death in the late editions—but not on the front page where you've been looking.

Deputy George Gutzman was a tired man by the time he began his next night's work; but he was a happy one. Nobody could tell him Axelrod's confession was just a bad dream, and he'd been right. There was ironic justice in it, too. If Axelrod's conscience hadn't tormented him into making that con-

fession, Parker might have gotten away with his scheme. After Parker's arrest, he'd confessed to having been in the car when Stanton was killed. He'd been thrown free of the wreck and managed to get away unnoticed before the police arrived at the scene. All he had on his mind, once he knew his partner was dead, was the bonanza Stanton had been telling him about—and the letter he'd mentioned receiving from his ex-wife. She must have heard that Stanton was doing better, he decided, and with Stanton dead she was in line for half of a fortune she didn't know existed. Parker was a gambler, a man accustomed to making swift decisions. He'd gone to Mrs. Casey and bought back her stock, but that wasn't enough. Then he remembered Jenny Carr, Parker was good at remembering beautiful women, and something clicked. Something quite different had clicked when the jailer shoved the cell door shut on him.

"Too bad he couldn't be charged with murder," Gutzman said aloud. It was coffee break time and Lundigan, his face in the newspaper again, caught only the last word.

"Same thing every day," he said. "Crime, wars, corruption. I tell you, Gutzman, we're suckers. Just plain suckers."

He was nice kid. Too bad, Gutzman thought, that he hadn't been along when they made the call at Jenny Carr's apartment. She was a nice kid, too, and after her experience with Parker maybe she could knock some of that nonsense about easy money out of his mind. It might be a good idea to send Lundigan down to scout the Sirocco Cabaret some night. In costume, Jenny could probably knock almost anything out of Lundigan's mind.

But all Gutzman said was,

"If you're still looking for that honest man, Diogenes, turn your lantern on the back page."

It was there in the death notices just as Harris had said:

*Funeral arrangements are being made today for Arvid Axelrod . . .*

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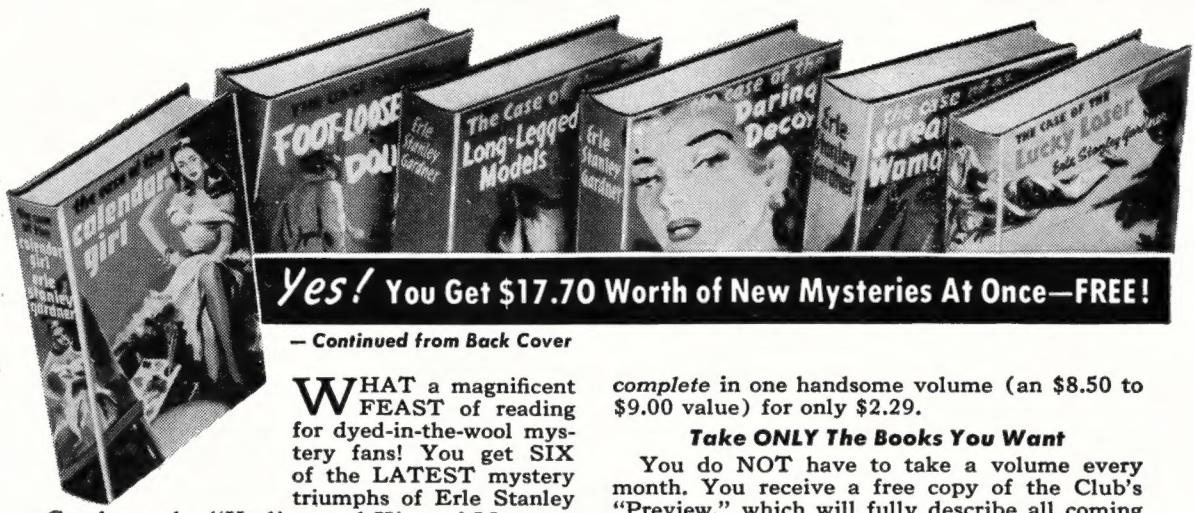
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